

a Bridge Rebuilt

A RagBros Digital Zine



Foreword

Hello and welcome to "A Bridge Rebuilt"

We would like to begin by saying thank you to everyone that worked on this zine. All the contributors made this fun project possible and we're very excited to share all their works with you!

That being said, any form of redistribution through personal means, reprint or full content reupload is **STRICTLY PROHIBITED**. If you would like to share this zine, please do so through our carrd link.

Please enjoy and thank you for your support!

Sincerely,

ABR Mod Team

A Bridge Rebuilt:
A Ragbros Digital Zine





the minds we had/i want them back

bog

Kaeya's head shot up as a loud bang sounded. No screams followed, so he sat, just for a second, and took a deep breath. He stood up from his desk and poked his head into the hallway. Green smoke billowed from around the corner. Kaeya sighs, grabs a handkerchief from his desk, and braces himself for the mess he knows is waiting for him.

It came from the alchemy lab, because of course it did. As he got closer, Kaeya could make out quiet sniffls. This made him hurry, skidding around the corner.

The smoke settled to the ground and slowly dissipated, so Kaeya tucked the handkerchief in his breast pocket, not bothering to protect his lungs. Among the green smoke stood a smudge of red.

Of course.

"I wanted to see Albedo, but the door wouldn't move, so I pushed it!" Klee waved her hands around her as she spoke. "I fell into the room though, and I knocked a bunch of bottles off the table. The glass broke and it started fizzing so I just... ran!"

"Are you okay, Klee? Did you get any on you?"

"No, I got out quickly enough." Klee fiddled with her fingers, and Kaeya saw a small burn on her thumb.

"Good, good," Kaeya grabbed her hand, holding it up to his eye. "Are you sure?"

"Fine! The steam got me."

Kaeya smiled, and put her hand down. As he patted the back of it, he said "You'll be fine, then. It'll just hurt for a while."

Footsteps sounded down the hallway. It seems like everyone else finally started to catch up. Jean led the charge, with Albedo and Lisa following closely behind.

The three looked at Kaeya with an unspoken *is she alright?*

Kaeya nods.

They all let out a breath, and Albedo went to the door to check the damage. He stood still for a while. Slowly, he turned.

It's a silent rage. Albedo knows better than to yell at what was an honest mistake, but Klee also knows better. She can tell by the shaking clench of his jaw that this is the angriest he has ever been.

"Albedo... I'm sorry."

“Let’s... give him a minute!” Jean said.

Trusting Kaeya to handle the Klee situation, Jean follows Lisa through the doorway.

Klee is still looking where she last saw Albedo.

“He hates me.”

Kaeya sucks in a breath. “He does not.”

“How can he not hate me? This is the worst thing I’ve ever done.” Tears begin to well up in Klee’s eyes.

“Klee, no offense, but you are a baby.”

“Hey!”

“No, I mean it quite literally. You are a child.”

Kaeya kneels down beside her. “If you were my age and did this, maybe he would be mad at you, but right now, he’s just mad at the situation. Trust me on this. This is your big brother we’re talking about, you two have a bond that can’t be broken.”

Klee just sniffls, but she manages to wipe her tears. Kaeya rubs a hand on her back.

“Come here.”

Kaeya is a little surprised at the force with which she hugs him. But he doesn’t complain. He just holds Klee until her tears die down. It’s a bit of an awkward position, balanced on one knee while curled protectively over her.

He’s spared when he hears footsteps coming back up the stairs. Without even turning his back, he knows it’s Albedo. Gently, he pries Klee off of himself, and puts both hands on her shoulders. She meets his eye, and they share one resolute nod.

“Klee, come here.”

Klee shuffles her feet, but she makes her way over to Albedo silently. He mirrors Kaeya and drops to one knee. He all but scoops her into his arms, and buries his face in her shoulder.

“I’m sorry for scaring you.” It’s muffled, but Klee could hear him just fine.

“I’m sorry for ruining your lab.”

“Oh, Klee...” Albedo pulls back to look her in the eyes. “You are so much more important to me than my lab. I struggle to think of anything you could do to actually make me mad.”



Klee just sniffs.

“Truce?” Albedo holds out a pinky. Klee hooks her own around it, and they give a firm shake.

Kaeya can only smile softly at the scene. He waves goodbye to Klee when Albedo truly scoops her up, and she gives a little salute before being carried away to her room to clean up.

Lisa exits first. “The damage is really, really bad.”

Kaeya stills. “What? Is there structural damage?”

“No, your damage.”

Jean grabs Lisa’s elbow. “Do not.”

“Well now I’m interested. Tell me, Miss Minci, what my ‘damage’ is?”

Lisa takes a moment to pretend to think. “Hmm. ‘A bond that can’t be broken?’ That sounds *awfully* familiar.”

Jean bites her lip.

“I have no clue what you’re talking about, you’ll have to be a bit more clear.” He normally loved playing this game with her, but he can feel the familiar curtain fall over his face as he schools his features. It’s not that he doesn’t trust them, quite the opposite, in fact. They were there for him right

right after *it* happened, after all.

“It’s about you and that brother of yours. Hopefully you get it now.”

Kaeya swallows. “That’s enough. Please. Not now.”

Lisa jumps at the chance. “So, later?”

“You know what? Sure. I’ll talk to you about this later. I’m looking forward to it.” He couldn’t shake them off, no matter how hard he tried. Deep down, *did he want to?*

A grin and a raised eyebrow from Lisa, and a relieved sigh from Jean.

Kaeya feels a bit numb as he watches the pair walk away, Jean massaging her temples at the pile of paperwork waiting for her after this, and Lisa rubbing her shoulders.

This is something he’s thought of for a while. A way to break the ice, weather the steam that had grown between them. But every time he thought of it, he managed to convince himself it’s no use. What’s done is done. He felt the same as he always had: he would figure out a way to make them drop it.

That was only the beginning of it. Now, whenever Kaeya had a private moment with Jean or Lisa, in moments of silence, they would just look at him.

He knows exactly what they're thinking of, and they know he knows.

Eventually, he gets a little smile and a raised eyebrow. Here, he tries to pick up the conversation again. They let him, the first few times.

Truly, they need to focus more on their work, instead of wasting time on him. Well, at least Lisa does.

It isn't until one of his on-duty nights that they make their move.

Lisa cornered him as he tried to leave his office, hand to his chest as she pushed him backwards through the doorway. She stepped in after him, let Jean in behind her, and shut and locked the door. When Kaeya looked at her incredulously, she just laughed.

"Really, I thought we gave you enough warning. I know you know what those looks were about."

Jean rubbed Kaeya's arm as he took it in. "I know it's not exactly my place to butt in on your family matters, but... come on."

Kaeya took a deep breath, readying the justification that he'd prepared since that first day. *It's over and done. What I did was not something that can be forgiven. I deserved the first punishment, and I deserve this one too. What's best for him is to keep him at a distance. I know he's uncomfortable around me.*

All that came out was a sigh.

"Fine. Give me your advice. I know you'll give it anyway."

"Well," Jean began, "you need to be nicer to yourself, for starters."

"That's *very* rich, coming from you, Jeanie."

Jean's smile dropped, and Kaeya can feel a little fear of Barbatos in him.

"Do you know how I spent last weekend, Kaeya?" After his silence, she continued. "I spent some time with Barbara. We got lunch, I took her on a hike, and I enjoyed it! 'It' being *spending time with my sister*."

A deep, long, suffering sigh. "Fine. Fine. But it won't be as easy as you think it will be."

Jean smiled. "I know that. I also know how you feel—how you both feel. I'm not as close with him as when we were kids, but I can still tell that he... misses you."

"I'm waiting for the actual advice. You have to give me something I haven't already thought of. It's not like I've thought this over for three years, or anything."

"I've been thinking for about three minutes now," Lisa hummed, "and I think I've got something. How about we plant some fake intel in his network and have him meet up to do a mission with you? I think we recently found a rather simple domain that relies mostly on puzzles to escape, rather than

fighting. You two won't be in actual danger, but you'll still be forced to work together."

"You know about his secret network?"

"My dear, do you think I'm stupid?"

"No ma'am."

"Good! Well, have you thought of that before?"

Kaeya held his chin in thought. "Not in those exact circumstances... I never really wanted to lie to him, again. Not that he would really trust me to begin with."

"Either way, he does trust me. Can you believe it? He even gave me a compliment the other day. And here I was thinking he was so sour all the time. Turns out all you have to do is give him a map of the recent riftwolf sightings, and his smile will light up the room!"

Kaeya thought of the recent smiles he'd seen on Diluc. He struggled to think of one.

He thought of Klee, her tears, and her joy when Albedo returned.

"I'm trusting you both with this. If you two can successfully plant the information, you have my word that I'll be there."

Jean clapped her hands in front of her, clearly praising the powers that be. She looked at Lisa, who nodded.

"You have our word."

Kaeya tapped his foot on the cobblestone.

He couldn't head too deep into the domain, or the doors would close and lock behind him. It was hard to find a spot that was out of sight of the door, but would still reveal him and prevent a surprise hilt to the skull. So here he was, hiding behind a pillar like a child.

He hears the gentle crush of boots on gravel, and steadies his breathing. Before he could truly steel himself, Diluc was well past the threshold, and setting off the door.

"Oh."

At the noise, Diluc spun around, knife flicked from his sleeve to his hand. Lowering his blade after a few seconds, he grabbed his chest and swore. "Why. Why are you here? Why would you do that?"

"I didn't *mean* to." Kaeya could feel the whine leak into his voice. "I was tasked with exploring this place, and I saw these scratches on the walls, and was studying them. I only just arrived."

Luckily for him, there actually were scratches on that pillar, and Diluc squatted down to take a closer look. “Hm.”

Hauling himself up by a divot in the door, Diluc tested the strength of it. Solid rock, like always. “Great. Well, we have to get out of here. Just... come on.” Diluc checked his pockets and readied his claymore before stepping forward.

Kaeya had no choice but to follow.

The next room was small, and the walls lined with patterned tiles, except one. When Kaeya reached up to touch the blank panel, Diluc grabbed his wrist.

“Ouch! What!”

“Check for traps first, idiot.”

Kaeya pursed his lips. From Lisa, he knew there were no actual traps in the domain, but Diluc didn’t...

After a quick survey of the room, Diluc nodded.

He reached up again, and the first tile glowed softly under his fingers. A hieroglyph on the upper right light flashed, then the lower right. Kaeya pressed the two that glowed in order. The blank panel pulsed once, and then two new

tiles flashed in succession. Kaeya made quick work of the game, until the end.

Kaeya had found the pairs quite easy, because they were. But the last puzzle consisted of every tile going off in order. He wasn’t paying attention! He didn’t remember the ones at the very beginning, now.

He heard Diluc sigh behind him, then nudge him aside as the blank panel pulsed urgently. Diluc squinted, then pressed—correctly—every tile. The final panel winked at them, and a new door opened.

“Why didn’t you try to remember all of them? That kind of game always ends with the long sequence.”

Kaeya huffed. “I was caught up in the pure joy of the sport, my apologies.”

The corner of Diluc’s mouth twitched. Twitched *up*. Kaeya internally jumped for joy.

On the outside, the pair were perfectly civil to each other. Not friendly, but amicable. When Kaeya would get drunk and mourn in Rosaria’s lap about it all, Albedo would question why.

“Clearly he doesn’t hate you. He’s not barring you from the tavern, or even conversation. Where does the ‘hate’ come from?”

Kaeya hadn’t told them the full details of that night, and he wasn’t sure he ever would. He wasn’t sure how to tell them that seeing and feeling their bond sever

was like losing half of himself. He could still read every emotion on Diluc's face, no matter how minute. Years later, when he caught Diluc's eyes across the bar, he saw glimpses of anger, apathy, and annoyance. He ignored the regret he knew he saw.

So to see a hint of joy and humor in him, and at him, made Kaeya hide his own smile. He knew this was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

Diluc had walked ahead, and Kaeya followed.

Two more simple, but time consuming puzzles were waiting for them. With each one completed, Kaeya let a bit of his happiness out, and it did not go unnoticed. After the third puzzle, Diluc clapped him on the shoulder. Granted, it was to brush off the dust that collected after Kaeya had to haul statuettes across the room, but still.



The fourth room was the final one. The pair could see the door out on the far side of the room, magically relocated, of course. In the middle of the room were two elemental monuments, facing each other across a circle.

At the sight, Diluc let out a short laugh. "Ironic, that it's the only two elements we wield, hm?"

Kaeya hummed. Of course, he knew from Lisa that the domain adjusted itself to those who entered. As freaky as the ley line magic can be, he supposed this domain could make a good training circuit for new recruits.

"I suppose it'll be easy to guess the order they're activated in." Diluc stretched an arm to prepare.

Lisa hadn't actually told him what the process for this last room is. *I want this one to be a surprise, I can't give you all the answers now, can I?*

"There might be some trick to it." Kaeya held his chin in his hand.

"Well, get ready, then."

Diluc struck first, and Kaeya managed to catch himself before he winced as the flames shot out from Diluc's blade. The monument blinked, clearly activated, but it was blinking fast. Kaeya saw this, and sent a blast of cryo towards the other monument without using his sword. The other monument blinked, and both went dark.

“Ah, the other way around.” Kaeya sent another wave of cryo, more of a gentle breeze, at his monument. Diluc did the same. The monuments blinked out, again.

“Hm,” they said, in unison.

Kaeya had lost count of how many combinations they had run through after that. Failing the first dozen times, he and Diluc just took turns sending elements over in quick succession, but they couldn’t find the combination, even by accident.

“Wait,” Kaeya said, “let’s try hitting them at the exact same time. No delays.”

Diluc slowly nodded his head. “I... don’t know why I didn’t think of that before.”

“One of us has to have the brains, I suppose.”

“If I was the brawns, I wouldn’t have helped with, oh, two of the three other puzzles?”

Kaeya didn’t dignify that with a response, and prepared to hit the monument for what he hoped would be the final time.

Diluc looked like he remembered something. He cleared his throat before simply saying, “Breathe.”

Kaeya didn’t have to ask what he meant. They both knew. The training they put themselves through isn’t so easily forgotten, after all.

Diluc met his gaze, and took a comically large breath in. Kaeya did the same, and they both slowly let the air out. They breathed in, again. Out. They turned, in tandem, and took another breath.

When the elements burst forth, the monuments winked together. The wall opened, and the green of the grass could be seen through the open door.

Diluc smiled, truly. With teeth!

Kaeya breathed in the freshest air he’s felt, in a long time.

End.







All Quiet on the Northern Front

Ikusen Ishiyama

South Korea, 1952

Commanding Officer Colonel Ayato Kamisato calls a dire meeting for all surgeons in the mobile army surgical unit. Within minutes, the four surgeons in the camp crowd into his office, bickering about other personnel and how abhorrent the morning food tasted. One of them even mentioned that the coffee was colored *purple*. Ayato pinches the bridge of his nose and raises a hand to get them to quiet down.

He reluctantly unfolds a note from 'I Company' and reads it aloud. "Battalion Aid Station Forty-Seven is undergoing heavy shelling. Main surgeons killed in action. M.A.S.H. 8055 to send in two doctors for temporary duty until replacements arrive. That's it." Ayato pauses and sighs, "Any volunteers?"

Captain Diluc Ragnvindr, a red-maned, no-bullshit surgeon stands up confidently. "I volunteer."

Ayato nods. Major Zhongli Gui, the head surgeon, steps forward, but the colonel stops him in his tracks. "Zhongli, we can't have you going out there. You're still recovering from your appendix. Ajax is still in Tokyo."

Zhongli's shoulders drop. "Yes, sir."

"It's between Albedo and Kaeya."

Kaeya, snooping through Ayato's file cabinet, freezes when he hears his name. Slowly, he closes the drawer and looks at all of them. Especially Albedo, who stares back. Neither of them seem to want to volunteer, but instead of Ayato and Zhongli eyeing Albedo to step up, they were looking at him.

He notices and chuckles nervously, "Rock, paper, scissors?"

The corner of Ayato's lip twitches. "Kaeya and Diluc will be sent to Battalion Aid. Hurry and prepare, they need you out there."

"Colonel, I don't think you understand what you're doing, I can't—"

The commanding officer stands from behind his desk to meet Kaeya's gaze. "You can't what?"

Be with my brother, he wants to say. His *unbearable, egotistical* brother.

"I have vertigo."

Diluc scoffs, crossing his arms.

Diluc and Kaeya are quiet on the way to the front, the muffled whirring of the jeep is the only ambient noise between them until they inch less than a mile from the battlefield. That's when they could hear the heavy shelling, the gravel and dirt rumbling from under the vehicle's wheels and through their bodies. The area is clouded and gloomy compared to the impeccable clear skies and summer weather back at the M.A.S.H. unit.

One field medic is waving them down in the distance, next to a battered and shaken aid station, where the roof is completely torn off and the walls did not seem like walls anymore. Kaeya trembles at the thought. *The previous surgeons died here.* I'm next, he thinks. He clenches his fists as he follows after Diluc, who had already hopped off the jeep to meet the field medic.

The medic extends his hand to Diluc, "Lieutenant Al-Haitham. Thank you for coming in such short notice."

"Captain Ragnvindr. What's going on here?"

Kaeya tries to shake the lieutenant's hand after Diluc has, but they're already pacing to the shelter, where he sees a hot mess of supplies, blood, and live men waiting in agony to get treatment from surrounding corpsmen. Everyone wore helmets save for those with head injuries. He purses his lips and trails closely behind. Their conversation is quick and urgent, multiple wounded are coming by the truckload to their poorly treated shelter.

Diluc starts ordering the corpsmen and medics around, giving a man a dose of penicillin here and a dose of morphine there.

While his brother is busy with the meticulous details of the men recovering in one 'room,' Kaeya walks through what *used* to be a doorway to another 'room.' One where freshly picked men from the battlefield are being hauled in. He sees a medic hovering over a man bleeding out from his abdomen, trying to stop the flow by applying pressure to his wound, and Kaeya rushes there to help.

"Oh God, I hope you're a doctor," the soldier groans out as Kaeya rinses his hands in hydrogen peroxide.

Kaeya chuckles nervously, "I'm not. Just some guy who thinks he knows what he's doing."

The medic already tending to the soldier looks up at the young doctor incredulously. An unbearable silence, save for the commotion, looms between them.

He purses his lips as if now is finally the time he contemplates his existence in Korea. He starts to examine the wound, lifting up the reddened cloth the medic had in his hands. Grabbing the forceps on the instrument table nearby, he allows the medic to relieve the pressure. "Plasma, Corporal...?"

"Corporal Thoma Brandt," he reveals, reluctant. "I'll get you that plasma."

Diluc is stitching a young man's chest when an especially strong mortar hits the area nearby. It makes the whole establishment shake. He immediately throws his upper body over the patient to protect him from the debris and ashes that sifted through the wooden planks that miraculously survived while the roof clocked out for the rest of the war. Just as he was about to deem the threat clear, another blast hits them.

He hears a horrified shriek from the separate room and huffs. It sounded too much like Kaeya.

"Captain Alberich?" He hears someone ask, their tone urgent and worrisome, "Are you alright?"

The redhead shakes his head and resumes patching up the soldier in front of him. He couldn't say that he was surprised, he expected it. Kaeya is always so keen on taking on challenges that are way above his threshold. In fact, he put on a courageous bravado when he got drafted into the army and insisted Diluc to not worry about him and care for his father's Winery. But he did for lack of trust in his brother, and volunteered after the fact.

"Lieutenant Haitham, this one's ready."

The medic nods, whistling over two corpsmen to take the soldier to the ambulance. Another two bring in a particularly young looking boy who

cannot be any older than eighteen years old. Baby fat still surrounded his cheeks as if he never made it out of puberty.

Diluc tilts his head to the side when he sees him.

"Pretty young, huh?" Haitham comments, holding out a bowl of hydrogen peroxide for Diluc to disinfect his hands in. "We get that a lot here. Young boys mean cannon fodder."

"I've seen my fair share."

The doctor unravels the thick gauze that shrouds the boy's head and nods when he sees the wound. Moderate head trauma with tolerable amounts of blood flowing from the gash upon his temple. "Still got silks, Lieutenant?"

"Only for you," an instrument table is brought to his side instantaneously.

Diluc starts his work on cleaning the head wound, dousing a cloth full of alcohol and dabbing it on the thick, chipping blood. The young boy hisses at the sting, nerves crying at the pain. The Selective Service is a bitch. A mere eighteen year old is expected to know how to cope with politics, tragedy, and daily adult life while Diluc himself knows that the brain probably isn't truly developed until later. His expert medical opinion is the basis of that fault, yet his own experience doubles it.

When he was eighteen, his father, Crepus Ragnvindr, lost his life during the

Second World War and their battle over Europe. He was an interpreter, translating German documents to help advance the allies against the enemy. Lack of better management over the army caused them to deploy his father to the front lines to receive intelligence there in real-time, and he was soon caught in the crossfire.

Crepus's death was unjustifiable in every manner, and Diluc, being on the cusp of adulthood, couldn't handle the inundation of loss, responsibility, and consequences.

To be fair, Kaeya was only sixteen. Sixteen and undeserving of his wrath due to his sudden promotion to the head of the Ragnvindr clan. It's something he would rather push to the back of his mind than it circulating in his memories while he's stitching a boy's head back together. As the boy laments in the loss of a friend on the field, he remembers his first week at the M.A.S.H. unit. No training in the world could ever prepare him for the vulnerability they're granted mere miles from the northern front.

But what *brought* him here?

A mortar shakes the establishment again and he hears Lieutenant Haitham's voice, which booms in every man's ear.

"We asked for a doctor, not a jester, so are you going to patch up our men or crawl in a hole? I'll call the 8055 again for another doctor if you keep up

this behavior—"

Diluc didn't realize that the medic had long left his side and was replaced by a nearby corpsman.

Another voice from before comes to Kaeya's defense, "Cut him a little slack, Lieutenant. He's already tended to at least ten men. This war can get on *anyone's* nerves."

Diluc exhales and informs the corpsman that the young boy is dealt with, and to give him another patient. In that downtime, he pays the commotion a visit and sees Kaeya crouched up underneath the makeshift operating table, holding his bloody hands to the back of his head, rocking back and forth. It's a pitiful sight.

He squats down to Kaeya's eye level and sees that he's crying, dirt-stained tear tracks line his cheeks. "Kaeya."

His brother shakes his head and looks away. "Kaeya we need you. Would you rather die or be responsible for another man's death?" Diluc sighs, "This is the reason why I volunteered for this war because I *knew* that I would have to make up for the deadweight crying in front of me right now. I have a patient waiting for me and you do, too. Stand up. Cooperate."

He doesn't mean it, does he? Diluc told Kaeya that the reason he volunteered was because he wanted to save as many men as possible to prevent other families from experiencing the same loss they had when they were just teens. To be fair, he did suspect an ulterior reason, but... not this.

It couldn't be.

Kaeya pulls himself up from under the table, trembling as if lightning struck him. This time, it isn't because of the shelling, but the humiliation of his actions. He couldn't even look Diluc in the eyes. His unbearable, egotistical brother. Willing to berate him rather than console. There is nothing he wanted more than to leave, and he'd rather be anywhere but here.

The young doctor looks down at his patient and clenches his fist. These soldiers are in pain, they have experienced horrors beyond comprehension out there on the field, and Kaeya should at least owe it to the soldier for his aid and his courage. So he uncurls his fingers and asks Corporal Brandt for hydrogen peroxide.

A bowl full of the chemical is brought to his side, but Thoma sees the unwillingness in Kaeya's demeanor. "Are you... alright, sir?"

He closes his eyes and nods slowly, dipping his hands in the bowl. If he mutters another word about the situation he's as good as useless.

At the end of the day, the shelling and gunfire had ceased. Every step, crackle, and shuffle echoed throughout the night. Visibility is as low as the sterility in the area, but the last ambulance had left the vicinity and the medical staff had retired for the moment. Kaeya sits atop a bedding of dust and hay in one of the corners of the shelter, wrapped up in a blanket. He looks over to Diluc, standing in the doorway, eating beans out of the can.

Blood stains the redhead's shirt and sleeves, and it's a wonder he could still eat after everything that has happened. Kaeya's stomach feels pitted, crying out for any type of sustenance, but it only makes him unresponsive to his body. He's done his part, rode on the shelter's patience for too long—he wouldn't dare ask for anything else. His head rests on the wall as his eyes slowly droop, sleep overtaking his consciousness.

When he wakes up in the morning, the sky is unusually clear; the sun peeks over the establishment, leaking through the nooks and crannies. Kaeya squints and shields his sensitive eyes from its rays with his hands, and hears the corpsmen and medics hustling to organize supplies and clean what was left from the day before. Though other than the shuffle and chatter... the front is quiet.

The young doctor stands up and dusts himself off the dirt that stains his bottom, gathering the blanket in his hands and folding it neatly. A quick glance to his surroundings tells him that no wounded had arrived since they wrapped up yesterday. Diluc walks through the doorway and greets Kaeya, handing

him his medical supply satchel.

“The new surgeon arrived. We can go back to the unit now.”

“Thank God.”

He looks at the satchel incredulously. It’s lighter than usual, they must have burnt through most of the contents. He slings it over his shoulder while his brother heads to the Jeep, but before he follows, he finds Thoma. He makes sure to thank him for standing up for him back there, offering a handshake and to contact the M.A.S.H. 8055 for any aid in the future.

Mortars blast in the distance and he freezes, body too terrified to let go of Thoma’s hand. He looks outside and words cannot describe how his heart drops.

The sky is... *no longer blue*.

He *knew* something was wrong, fear crowded his every being that the only choice he has is to leave this place—*now*. So he looks to Diluc, waiting for him in the vehicle.

Kaeya finally bids his goodbyes and paces towards the entrance. Once he makes it out though, a shell hits the shelter from behind him, sending him flying forward and hitting the ground in a bone-crushing slam. The aid station is obliterated mercilessly. He crawls forward, every inch of his body in excruciating pain. He could hear Diluc yelling at him to get up, and when he

opens his eyes amidst the dust, he sees him hopping out of the Jeep to help him.

But right in front of his eyes, as Diluc’s boots touch the ground, he is struck with a mortar, too.

Holding his hand out to nothing but ashes, he screams.

Diluc hears Kaeya lament in agony and rushes to his side. It wakes the others from their slumber, and he tells them not to worry. His younger brother is breathing heavily, sweating beads, squirming in place—so he grabs his shoulders and shakes him awake.

“Kaeya,” he whispers angrily. “Kaeya, wake up!”

The man opens his eyes, shoulders tensing. He looks at Diluc with tears brimming from his eyes. Kaeya’s hands touch his face cautiously, as if he’s confirming that he’s not a hallucination. “You’re alive...” he starts sobbing, “You’re... *alive*.”

The anger inside Diluc subsides as he sees his brother vulnerable once again. Perhaps he’s been too harsh on him lately. He sits next to Kaeya and pulls him close. “Of course I’m alive. I’ll always be alive,” he assures him in a soft tone.

“I—I haven’t been a good doctor,” Kaeya mutters, hiccupping.

Diluc hugs him tighter when he feels him tremble. “You are a great doctor, Kaeya.”



He pauses to see if the other had anything to say, but all he can hear is sniffling. “I stand by my word that hiding every time a bomb goes off isn’t the best choice when you have a dying man in your hands. But you saved a lot of men today, don’t let the aid station discourage you.

“I wasn’t being fair to you. I didn’t mean when I said that I had to make up for a dead weight. As your older brother, I just wanted to know if you’d be okay because I care for you,” He sighs, leaning his head atop Kaeya’s which now rests on his shoulder. “You’ve done well so far. You were drafted without a choice and I decided to come with you not only because I wanted less fathers to

die, but because I couldn’t stand the thought of you facing this war alone. Turns out I forgot the latter in the process. There can be no excuse.”

Kaeya wipes a tear away. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what,” Diluc chuckles, “I’ve been the one hurting you.”

“I could be better.”

“Yeah, you can,” he agrees, but not condescendingly. Instead, he’s being encouraging. “But for now, I’m the one who owes you an apology.”

Major Gui serves Kaeya a glass of wine while he hands Diluc a glass bottle of grape nehi in Colonel Kamisato’s office. The chief surgeon smiles at the brothers as they clink their glasses and drink in celebration of their return. Ayato is gathering paperwork from the company clerk to report their temporary assignment from the northern front. Once he’s back inside, he notices something off.

He cocks his eyebrow. “Did I miss something?”

“Nothing at all sir,” Zhongli answers.

They all chuckle amongst themselves as Ayato takes his seat. Zhongli had already poured him a glass of wine, too. He stares at the three suspiciously

as he neatly stacks the documents in front of him. “Good to know.”

Ayato sips his drink and immediately starts to gag, spitting the liquid back in the glass. Some of it even spills on the floor. It’s bitter, and it burns his throat almost like how bleach can corrode through skin. Kaeya, Diluc, and Zhongli lose their composure, laughing boisterously. The colonel rubs his eyes and sighs.

“I take it Ajax is back, too?”

Kaeya winks, “His *signature* moonshine!”

End.





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As the Dust Settles

Genesis



After all is said and done, the people of Mondstadt look for their home. The people are eager to rebuild, wandering torn streets as the sun rises high behind them, unmasked by the omnipresence of Celestia. For the first months, they do not rest, fingers busy memorising the feeling of the soil, reacquainting themselves with the flesh of their homeland. And when the moon peeks past the horizon and paints the burnt grass silver, Diluc allows himself time to breathe. To take it all in. The charred earth, blazing skies, the intense, buzzing energy that seemed to wrap itself around his throat like a snake. Though the world around him is silent tonight, his heart is roaring. The twins have left, fought their way through Tevyat and torn the land asunder to return to their rightful places by each other's side and all that is left is scorched grass and a chasm beside Diluc that is not new but aches like it is.

As the dust settles, the people still work. People, who were once Gods, dust themselves off and look at their now mortal hands in awe. People, who were once worshippers, open their arms to their former Gods in guidance. Diluc's hands stay clenched, his own olive branch held tight to his chest.

There is a lingering charge in the air around him. As if the land is trying to shift itself back together, to rejoin and recollect the lost pieces of itself, wanting

nothing more than to be whole. The land's desire is reflected in its people. Families are reconciled, lovers cling to each other and brothers return to arms once again. There is a desperation in their tears, a fear for the future and yet, Diluc can see the joy of completion that returning to those they loved had brought them. He turns on.

Walking around Mondstadt is strange now. Not in the way it was those years ago when vengeance took him to the roads and defeat dragged him back. At least back then things had stayed the same. The trees stood tall and the grass swayed and each step towards the city gates refreshed him. Now, it feels as if he is looking at a distorted bastardisation of his home. Like an unskilled artist with no reference has attempted to replicate the likeness of the land. It. feels wrong but not unrecognisable. Like all things, he will adapt.

He does not return to the Winery. Or at least what is left of it. Instead, he camps outside, hoping to reconnect with the newness around him and sleeps.

When he opens his eyes, he turns to face the sun, a golden beacon in the bright blue sky. His face twists, something that could be contemplation if not for the ache in his heart and the weight behind the turn of his frown, and before he can think about why the blue makes him so melancholic, he is rolling up his pack and rising to face the day.

He has avoided thinking about Kaeya successfully for these past months. It is not a trend he desires to break, but it is as if the thought pushes past him and

into the forefront of his mind. Diluc shivers. Their fight against Celestia, the Abyss and all that sought to reduce Tevyat to rubble had flayed Diluc open. Kaeya had been right in the middle of it and Diluc had been unable to move past the notion of only one of them being present to rebuild this new Tevyat.

Prior to the beginning of the end, he had worked like clockwork. He would wake, greet Adelinde, work in the vineyards and in the early afternoon, head to the city to open the tavern. Somedays, Venti would sweep into the tavern bringing with him cheer and song. Diluc would always slide him a glass of wine and quietly ignore his tab, treating it as a silly sort of offering to a God he loved but did not revere. The sound of the lyre would play and Diluc would allow it to carry him through the night until.

A few hours to closing, Kaeya came in. He sat directly in front of him, smiled, though it never reached his eyes and pulled out all the flamboyance he held within him, tied it around his secrets and they exchanged tense words, accompanied by chuckles that Diluc felt sounded like sobs. It was nothing noteworthy, it never was those days and the distance between them loomed ever further. It was unsettling to look into the face of one who you considered your second half and see, not a stranger, but a brother pretending to be an enemy. It always left him feeling discomfited, even when the conversation was civil. Often, during those days when the Angel's share stood between the mills of Mondstadt, Diluc entertained the thought of asking how he was. How he was when he was away. He wrestled with the thought that perhaps, it was none of

his business. It was a strange, painful thing to come to terms with, not being privy to the details of Kaeya's life anymore. He never asked, he was unsure if he ever would ask, and they would lapse into a silence that Diluc couldn't tell if it was comfortable or not.

He wonders, as he makes his way through Mondstadt's plains, how Kaeya has handled these past months. Kaeya loved all of Teyvat like it was slipping through his fingers, fists clenched to grab onto what was fated to run past him. Diluc had never understood his desperate, clinging adoration for the world around them. He, himself, had watched it since he was a child, patient and silent as if he knew that surely it would all be there when he woke up the next day.

Maybe he had been a fool. It would be the first time his expectations had fallen through nor the first time his complacency had scorned him. Teyvat was still here but it was different, it would always be different and Diluc wasn't sure that he was ready to face it in its entirety.

Preoccupied with his thoughts, he finds himself at the city gates. It is the first time he has stepped through them since the end had come. He finds himself face-to-face with Jean. She is different, in a way he cannot place. Vibrant where she had used to be dull, despite the mess around her. The city was slowly reforming, not quite what it used to be but so interwoven with the efforts of the people that Diluc couldn't help but feel that it felt more like their city than the old Mondstadt ever had. He looks to her left and sees Barbara and he thinks he

understands why she shines the way she does now. He tries not to let his heartache show on his face.

The look Jean gives him is a familiar one - uncomfortably so. He knows his face twists the same way when he looks at Kaeya, when falsehoods spill from his lips. It speaks of resolve, intense and burning, the desire to draw out truths and bring secrets to life. It speaks of an intolerance for self-deception and before she speaks he knows what she will say.

Go to him, she says.

I will, he replies.

Yet he has been here for hours, turning his back to the tavern whenever he comes near it. He tries and fails not to think about what he sees around him. Tries not to think about how he is alone here as others cling to what they thought they had lost before their city had been reduced to ruins. He tries not to think of Jean and Barbara, the way they clung to each other as if they could not bear to be apart. He tries not to think about Rosaria and Razor, Eula and Amber, the children he saw down by the crumbling fountain. He had watched them fondly as they played, stepping over splintered wood and rock, behaving as if the only thing that mattered was that they were together and not that the world had fallen to pieces and was being rebuilt at their feet.

And maybe that was all there was to it. Maybe it wasn't the city that was home

to them. Diluc had hauled brick and mortar over his shoulder for the past months, had laid stone upon tar and hammered wood into nails and yet, as he watched the families he helped he had never felt further from his home.

He had ignored the space beside him, instead handing pieces of himself to the people of the city in the hopes that by giving himself away, there would be none of him left to acknowledge the emptiness he felt.

In all the ways that Tevyat had changed, in all the ways that the land had been reshaped and reformed, this had never changed for him. Diluc could not lie. He had been hollow for years, denying himself the warm fullness of a home that was not just stone and brick. The knowledge that he may not get a chance to rebuild his home scares him like nothing else. For a brief moment, he considers staying where he is, to continue to revel in his own self-flagellation. But he looks up and the sky is so blue, and the sun's warmth so fleeting against his face that he cannot be still. So he does as he promised Jean he would, and goes to him.

Diluc finds him at the winery, and it is a sight as familiar as it is foreign. He is bare, stripped down in the way he is no longer adorned by the jewels and motifs of Khaenri'ah and Diluc finds himself startled by the sight of two eyes following him as he approaches from the vineyard. He is relaxed, eerily so, breaths slow and arms crossed loosely against his chest as if he has come to terms with something that Diluc is not privy to. The notion sets him on edge,

and for a second he considers leaving, turning tail and disappearing into the night to try again later. But as his boots crunch against a patch of charred grass, he remembers that there may not be a next time. And even then, he is no coward, those thoughts alone push him forwards.

Kaeya does not startle when Diluc stands beside him, closer than he has in years. The feeling alone quells him and his breath catches in his throat. How long had it been since he had felt this complete? Kaeya smiles knowingly, not his usual catty smirk, but a small, honest quirk of his lips that settles upon Diluc's heart like a blanket. Despite the cryo he once yielded, Kaeya is so warm.

A hand is offered to him. Diluc blinks, pleasantly surprised as he takes Kaeya's hand. They sit in the grass, Kaeya placing his sword to the left of him so Diluc can sit undisturbed. Diluc is reminded of their childhood all those years ago. As similar as his memories are, there is still so much that is wrong. The foreignness of Kaeya near the Winery, the everpresent ash in the air, the result of the war. Diluc tries not to stare at the sword that Kaeya has not willed away. It hurts regardless.

They sit in silence for a while, the night air still as if holding its breath for them. Diluc appreciates the camaraderie. It is Kaeya who breaks the silence, voice soft and lilting, his accent clear in the way his tongue works around the syllables of Tevyat common. This, at least, is familiar.

After what seems like hours, Kaeya exhales, deflating against the grass, and the scene is so similar, that Diluc cannot bear it. He grabs Kaeya's sleeve, fisting the material in his grip as he trembles and pulls. Kaeya's head finds its way to his lap and finally. They breathe.

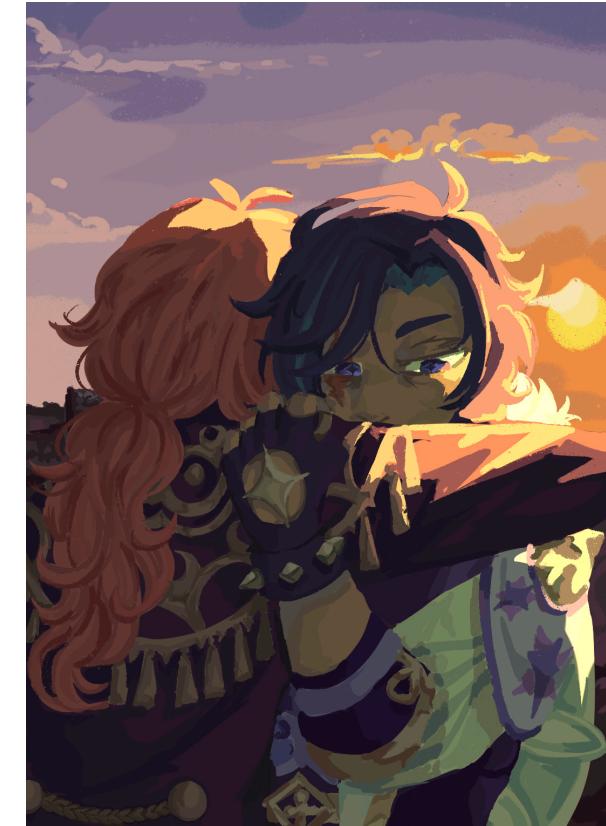
Back when Kaeya had first arrived in Mondstadt, he had craved touch in a way Diluc could not understand. His father had been free with his affections and in turn, Diluc had seen it as something to be expected from those who loved him and something to give to those he loved.

The first time Diluc had laid Kaeya's head in his lap had been the first time he had seen his brother cry. Diluc had been alarmed, only wanting to mimic the actions of his father, to provide the safety and compassion that he had felt whenever Crepus had opened his arms to him. Kaeya had explained afterwards, with hiccupped breaths, that he could not remember the last time he had felt that safe and it had brought him to tears. Diluc could not understand it, Kaeya had always appeared wise beyond his years to him, but the experience had lingered.

Since that night it had been years since they had been this close. Diluc could not remember the last time he had held anyone like this, let alone Kaeya and he was slightly surprised to see his fingers trembling and his vision blurring.

Kaeya was no better, the sound of muffled sobs coming from where he had curled up against him. Diluc tried to ignore it. Vulnerability had always been rewarded with a turned back between them, but he remembered Jean, how she

had held the hand of her sister so tightly and he could not bring himself to sit still. Taking Kaeya's hand he opened his mouth to speak but words failed him. His throat felt tight, tears cutting his words before they could be spoken. He wanted desperately to give Kaeya something equal to his tears, to his vulnerability, given to the one man who had turned it into a weapon against him.



His father had once said that the most valuable gift to give was the gift of oneself. And as Diluc bent down to place his head against Kaeya's cool skin so they could cry together, he offered himself to his brother once more.

The last few weeks have been different. Different to the way life had seen so many weeks ago when the people of Mond were resurrecting their city, different to his way of life even before then. Diluc had spent some time in the fields near Windrise, sleeping in the small tent he had been using prior, but he had outgrown it just as he had outgrown his desire for solitude. He had spent time near the ruins of the Winery. It was different now. Whatever resentment he once had, he didn't hold with him, but instead he held tightly to hope. It was new and strange, and fragile, but Diluc thought it felt better than the age-old anger.

Kaeya found him, unsurprisingly, at the door of The Angel's share, his feet crushing the charred debris into ash beneath him. It looked, in a way, like it always had but this too was different.

For one, he was standing next to his brother, not across the chasm of the counter.

Kaeya caught his eye and smiled. Something in Diluc constricted. It had taken some time to get accustomed to the brightness of Kaeya's authentic smiles. Diluc returned the smile with a small one of his own. This too was different, but it was nice.

Diluc stepped through the door, and Kaeya followed behind, shutting the door behind him. Once this building had been a source of stress for him, juggling the distance between himself and Kaeya as well as managing the threat of Mond's enemies from behind the counter. But now it felt like a second home,

familiar and welcoming. Any semblance of the past was a luxury in this new Tevyat and Diluc held tightly to this building and the man beside him.

Kaeya walked further into the tavern, so Diluc followed, confused but not bothered enough to question. As always, it seemed like Kaeya had thought miles ahead of him.

They climbed the stairs to the second floor before sitting at a lone table. Diluc sat down at Kaeya's insistence and watched him hurry back down the stairs. After a few minutes, he ascended the stairs again, holding a glass in his hands, placing it gently on the table with a small smile.

Confusion was plain on Diluc's face. Drawing the glass close to him he took a tentative sip, unsure if this was another one of his brother's jokes. But as he tasted the red juice, he felt his heart squeeze and he looked up at Kaeya, wide-eyed.

Kaeya had always been the superior mixologist between the two. His passion for consuming and creating alcohol had been unmatched within the Ragnvindr household and clearly still was. Diluc hadn't grasped the concept of flavours and fruits as prodigiously as Kaeya had despite his current skills as a bartender. In the space between his fathers' death and his return to Mondstadt, he had longed for the juices his father had squeezed from the fruits that had grown behind the mansion when he and Kaeya were younger to the point it had brought him to tears. He never got the chance to ask.

But Kaeya, sweet, keen, kind, Kaeya with a heart bigger than Diluc had ever deserved had given him the gift of his father's memory.

Almost knocking the glass over, Diluc reached over the table and pulled Kaeya into a hug, arms tightening around his shoulders with each inhale. Kaeya laughed a small, pleased sound and returned the embrace.

Diluc looked at the blue hair of his brother, and then down at the drink at the table. Things were different. Unfamiliar in a way that left him open, exposed and vulnerable. He had so much to relearn, the whole of Teyvat to bury his hands into and reacquaint himself with; so many bricks of the past to haul to over his shoulders to build himself a home for the future.

And yet, over that table, in the arms of half-charred Angel's Share, Diluc knew he had laid himself a solid foundation for his third chance at life.

End.





nif
florevaria



The Lost Swan

Hana

Allow me to tell you a tale, hailing from a land where the winged things have to fly south for winter (try to remember its name later). Its king had two sons, one by blood — christened Diluc — and one by vow — christened Kaeya. The king, Crepus, raised them to be princes as their birthrights required; well-versed with the slate and sword alike. And although his wife, the queen, had passed during the boys' early years, he took on her duties so effortlessly that he never thought to remarry.

Diluc and Kaeya never wanted for anything. During their lessons they would write atop crisp, snowy parchment with gold-tipped quills, and jostled whilst wielding swords with jewel-studded hilts. As the elder brother, Diluc anticipated the day he would take the crown with a naive sense of excitement, already drafting royal speeches and clever-sounding policies. Content with his everyday life and without need for power, Kaeya simply reviewed his brother's ideas and entertained his fantasies. Perhaps, he thought, he might be a knight when he grew up.

But as all fairytales go, all good times must come to an end (is this cliché? Overused? Ah, well). Crepus grew severely ill and died when the boys were only teenagers and, as Diluc was too young to become king, Crepus' head advisor Eroch was to rule as regent of their kingdom. Having spent many years

resenting his subjugation under Eroch's rule, unable to work beyond the will of the king, Eroch wanted to keep the crown and its power for himself for as long as possible, and was willing to remove the two princes from his way by any means necessary.

Now Eroch was capable of strange, wicked magic — if not, perhaps he might not have been able to clear his path so simply. Being rid of Kaeya, to him, was simple, for he was not first in line to the crown and was overlooked by many of the nobles. The day immediately after Crepus' funeral, Eroch snuck into Kaeya's bedroom at night, when he would not be awake to fight him off, and transformed him into a swan. He drove the transformed prince out the window, leaving nought but a white feather on the floor.

Before Diluc could realise his brother's disappearance, Eroch confronted him at breakfast and informed him that he was to complete his schooling in the countryside. He answered no questions about whether Kaeya would be studying with him, and bade Diluc leave the castle the moment he was done eating. And so, without time to even pack his bags, he was ushered away on a plain carriage pulled by a flea-ridden donkey that lacked even a footman to open the door for him. It was as though he was not royalty at all.

What awaited him was not a quaint schoolhouse hidden in the trees, but a plain cabin that he was expected to live in alone. It had no running water, its furniture worm-eaten and creaky and the cupboards empty. Diluc sat on the

thin mattress at the corner of the room and surveyed his pitiful surroundings. He had spent his entire life being waited on hand and foot; he had no idea how to sustain himself alone.

Eventually the morning bled to afternoon and he hungered, but there was no food waiting for him. He thought there might be fruits or berries around that were edible, but did not know what they looked like. Regardless, Diluc ventured into the swiftly-darkening woodlands, thorns catching the hem of his fine gown. Some bushes indeed grew berries, round, bright and shiny as decorative baubles, but he had read of berries that could kill someone with just a bite and did not want to risk his life.

While he pondered over whether he should move on and look for other plants, a green-eyed youth who was most lovely, witty and good-looking (et cetera, et cetera) came Diluc's way with his arms full of fresh fruits. He kindly offered the prince some of his pickings, and informed him of which wild plants were safe to eat. Before the youth roved away, Diluc asked if he had heard any news of Kaeya — for if Eroch had sent him away, he surely could not have left his brother alone.

The youth said, "I live far away from the castle, so I do not know. But at night, I see a lovely swan wearing a sapphire-studded diadem — a most wondrous sight — flying over these woods. Something so out of the ordinary might just be your answer." And then he winked and went away.

By the time Diluc returned to his cabin, having eaten his fruit, the sun was about to set. As he trembled in his threadbare bed, curling away from the slowly-emerging sounds of beasts and other creatures coming from the all-encompassing darkness, he finally heard something that came as a tiny bit of comfort — the sound of ruffling feathers.



Diluc's shoulders slumped in relief; he saw a shadow approaching his shutterless, curtainless windows.

Though he could not see what flew into the cabin, he recognised the quiet curse of pain that emerged when they crashed into the wall and struggled to their feet. "You are luckier than I," said Kaeya, "if you get to keep your human form."

Obstinately holding back his tears, Diluc leapt from his bed to rush blindly for his brother and hug him. "What has Eroch done to you?" He asked, voice trembling.

"Because of his dark magic, I now live as a swan by day but return to human by sunset. So I must find a safe place to alight by then, or I will lose my wings mid-air and fall to my death. And until I become human again, I must fly without rest. Perhaps I might be able to fly back to the castle and look for Eroch,

but surely the palace guards will chase me off before I can get close." Kaeya smiled sadly. "He might have already told everyone that we are dead. What can we do?"

Diluc's trembles that were meant to hold back tears then became trembles of rage, as he cursed Eroch over and over for condemning his brother to such a horrible fate. "I will find a way to save you," he vowed, "and then we will return to the castle and retake our birthright."

Then came a sigh. "That shall all happen in due time. But now, I am just happy to see you alive."

The brothers huddled together in the darkness, shivering without the fluffy duvets they were used to. Eventually they fell asleep — but when Diluc awoke, he was alone.

Sunlight streamed in through the open window, warming his numbed limbs as he got to his feet and stretched. With no elaborate morning routine to go through now, he pushed the creaky door open and went into the woods to forage once more.

This time the pretty youth was waiting for him by a berry bush. "Did you find what you were looking for?"



He sing-songed sweetly.

Diluc nodded. "My brother is alive, though I cannot say he is well. The current regent has transformed him into a swan, and I do not know how to break the curse."

"How curious," said the youth, and his smile faded. "Luckily, I have heard of a way to reverse a transformation spell like this."

Who would have thought the solution would come so easily? "What is it?" He pressed.

"Oh, it is a most painful process. You must first procure a piece of canvas, and create paint from crushed nettles, and upon the canvas paint your brother's likeness. When the painting is complete, only then can you show it to him, after which his human form shall be restored." The youth lowered his head. "But this is very important — as you create this painting, you must not speak. If even a single word is uttered, your brother shall remain a swan forever."

And what a terrifying threat that was! It would be most tortuous to dwell in silence for months and months, painting with crushed, stinging leaves he would have to harvest himself — and yet Diluc knew he had no other choice.

That night, he told Kaeya of the spell under the veil of darkness. Kaeya listened in silence, his cheeks wet with tears as he imagined the pain Diluc would go through to help him, and his voice was trembling when he finally

"When I fly, I see a place across the sea with fields of nettles nobody dares trespass upon. Let us go there, so your task can proceed quickly and undisturbed."

Surely that would mean yet more exhaustion for Kaeya, but he would not be swayed. Diluc woke up just before the sun was to rise above the horizon to weave a basket out of branches and splinters he had stripped from the floorboards. Somehow, despite how haphazardly it was made, it did not break when Diluc sat upon it. He uttered a prayer (most pious even in hardship) and they took flight.

Progress was slow, for Kaeya was still not fully used to his wings and strained to carry the weight of an extra person. But he persevered, soaring over the treetops until the vast buildings below seemed but dollhouses, the people strolling through narrow streets tiny as ants. All the while the basket swung precariously from his talons. The splinters that did not spiral to the ground dug into Diluc's palms where he clung to the branches with the knowledge that there was little he and Kaeya could do if he were to fall. As he watched the passers-by below go about their business, Diluc wondered what they would do if they looked up.

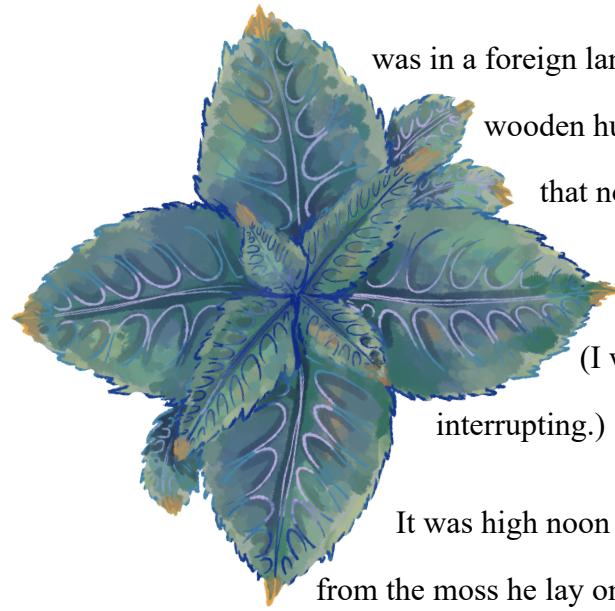
It was sunset by the time they reached the sea, and Kaeya flapped his wings furiously so they could make it across. The waves were most vicious, crashing against the rocks with white-crested fists; foam flew so high that beads of it

grazed Kaeya's feathers. They would not reach the other side of the shore in time for the night.

And yet (for they cannot meet their ends here!) the brothers did not fall to their deaths in the sea, for jutting out from the water were stones just large enough for them to fit onto. Diluc stepped onto it first, bare feet slipping on moss, then held out the basket for Kaeya to half-fall into as he returned to human form. Shivering from the frigid seawater and battered about by the winds, all they could do was keep their gazes fixed on the horizon for daylight to return.

And return it did, eventually, bringing with it warm morning breezes that dried off the seawater and scared tears. The warm sunlight brought Kaeya renewed strength; he hefted the basket in his claws once more and made the final stretch across the sea. When they reached land, he swooped down for one split second only to let Diluc alight from the basket, his legs wobbly from sitting inside it all day, and fall into a thicket of the very plants he was looking for. Then, as he was cursed to do, Kaeya had to fly away without even looking back.

Diluc's skin stung where it had touched the nettles, but he did not cry out for he would have to endure this pain tenfold if he wished to save his brother. Exhaustion settling bone-deep within him, he made his bed a nook between a couple of fallen trees, upon which he laid moss and went to sleep. Now that he



was in a foreign land he did not even have that shabby wooden hut to shelter him — it was likely that nobody even knew who he was here.

If he died, would anyone mourn?

(I would — oh, perhaps I should stop interrupting.)

It was high noon by the time he woke, still damp from the moss he lay on, and Diluc's young joints clicked uncomfortably as he rose. With no money and little knowledge of where he actually was (perhaps he should have paid more attention during his geography lessons), he would not be able to buy a swath of canvas from the market the same way he could in his homeland. But how would he start the painting of Kaeya without canvas? With no other alternative, Diluc took off his jacket and tore off the sleeves, undoing the seams until he was left with a piece of fabric large enough to paint upon. And so he got to work. With hands that had never known hard work before, Diluc crushed nettles and coated his fingertips with their sap to paint. He soon learnt to wipe his hands before eating, if he did not want to be wracked with pain. Every evening, Kaeya returned to the thicket, where his brother would tell him about the progress of the painting. The nettle sap was so thin that for the first few weeks there was to be nothing on the canvas — and although Kaeya could offer all the words of encouragement he wanted, Diluc could not respond.

A few painful months passed as such. Both had grown thin with hunger, constantly dirty and tired from their life in the woods. Even Kaeya's swan form was shedding feathers faster than normal. And yet the painting was far from finished — the youth had not said how detailed the painting had to be (oopsie), but Diluc assumed that the better it looked, the more chance he had of breaking the curse.

Now one day that kingdom's prince, Ajax, happened to be going through the countryside, and he caught sight of Diluc in the nettle thicket. Despite his bedraggled appearance, Ajax could see that he once was of noble birth. Intrigued and perhaps a little enamoured, Ajax dismounted and asked the former prince if he would like to join his court. Of course Diluc could not answer, but Ajax thought he saw him nod his head yes and bade him live in the castle as well. Once more, with little time to react, all Diluc could do was hide his half-finished painting under his skirt as he was whisked away.

In the castle, he was quickly reacquainted with the customs of royal life. He regained the weight he had lost through fine food, and was able to clean and make himself presentable. The other courtiers treated him like an oddity yet Diluc paid them no mind; every night he opened his bedroom windows so Kaeya could rest comfortably, and snuck him portions of his meals so he would no longer starve. When Kaeya had fallen asleep, he would sneak out to the castle graveyard to gather more nettles.

One night, it just so happened that a servant was passing by, who saw him lurking between the gravestones. He screamed for the guards, and Ajax rushed out with them. "What is the meaning of this?" Demanded the prince, to silence. Horrified now by his silent guest, he had him arrested and threatened with execution if he did not defend himself.

Locked in a prison cell, he spent every waking hour painting while Kaeya brought him nettles that he pushed through his tiny, barred window. Ajax visited him with food and questions that he refused to answer. "The courtiers are accusing you of witchcraft," the young prince said sadly. "They would have you burnt at the stake if you do not denounce your sins."

Still he said nothing. These royals could condemn him all they wanted, but they would never sway him from his work. Even when Ajax arrived one day in tears and said his father had confirmed his execution date, Diluc only flinched before going back to painting. His death did not matter if he could save his brother from an even worse fate.

Indeed, on the day he was to die and was taken from his cell he was still painting, filling in the final bits of his portrait with fingertips numbed to pain. Internally he wanted to cry at the vitriol that was being levelled towards him, yet he forced himself not to show weakness — Kaeya was nearby and soon to be saved.

As his cart neared the pyre, Diluc's work grew messier and more panicked,

his supply of nettle dwindling. So he would not have to look at his final resting place, he gazed at the sky instead. A white swan with a blue diadem was circling above the crowd.

The executioner took him by the arm and dragged him out of the cart, rope in hand, and Diluc rapidly shook the canvas so that its contents would face the sky. Kaeya folded his wings and bolted down to look at it.

The moment he beheld his own likeness, feathers began falling from the sky, and in a bright flash Kaeya landed on the pyre as a human in broad daylight. But in his haste,



Diluc did not have the time to finish one of his eyes, so it was milky and unseeing.

The crowd stumbled back, and Diluc used the chance to wrench free of the executioner's hold. In the front row, prepared to witness his death, the royal family bristled.

And yet It would not be long before they regained their senses and arrested not only Diluc but Kaeya as well. They had nowhere to run.



This is where people debate over how the ending goes. Some say Ajax himself condemned the brothers to death, while some argue that the onlookers were so amazed that they were allowed to leave peacefully. Some authors bring religion into it, which I think really watered down the struggle Kaeya and Diluc went through.

As for me? Well, I think the winds of change swept the two of them to safety (perhaps with the help of a pretty, green-eyed youth who was conveniently there) and they eventually managed to reclaim the crown.

And now I must go back and edit everything because apparently this manuscript is due tomorrow. Wrapping up this story properly will have to come later.

End.







A Splash of Color

deprecavi

Kaeya had been somewhat fascinated by the artworks on the walls of the Dawn Winery since the first time that he had seen them. Before he had been left in Mondstadt, there had been no time for something as frivolous as art, and anything as fragile as a canvas had been destroyed anyway. He was currently looking at a painting that seemed very familiar somehow, but he hadn't quite pinned down why.

"Father painted that!" Diluc said proudly, startling Kaeya. He hadn't heard the other boy approaching, lost in his contemplation of the image. That explained why it seemed familiar though, as he had actually seen this landscape in person. He recognized the building now as being one of the cottages on the Winery property.

"Father painted a lot of things," Diluc continued, his tone as boastful as if he were claiming his own achievements instead of his father's. "He especially liked painting birds."

Kaeya couldn't help noticing that Diluc was using past tense and wondered if Master Crepus did not paint anymore. He quietly asked Diluc if that was the case, and the redhead shrugged.

"I never see him paint, but maybe he does it when I'm sleeping. He hasn't

hung up anything new in a long time though.” Diluc stared up at the painting with Kaeya, a small frown on his face. “I can’t remember the last time he hung up a painting.”

“Can you paint?” Kaeya asked curiously. Diluc had sounded so proud of his father’s work and from what Kaeya had observed of the other boy, Diluc often tried to emulate his father.

“I never tried,” Diluc told him. “I bet if we ask, Adelinde will give us some paint.” He grabbed Kaeya’s hand and tugged the smaller boy after him to go in search of Adelinde.

They found Crepus first, reading through one of the Winery expense reports at the table, a cup of tea going cold at his elbow. He looked up as the pair of them entered the room, offering them a smile.

“Father, Kaeya likes your paintings and wants to try painting too,” Diluc announced. Kaeya was not particularly pleased to be put on the spot or presented as the one who had suggested this plan, but he felt somewhat less nervous about the attention being called to him when Crepus’ eyes lit up at Diluc’s words.

“You want to try painting?” he asked. Kaeya nodded hesitantly, going along with Diluc’s story. Crepus set aside the expense report and pushed his chair back from the table. “I haven’t painted in years, but I’d be happy to show you

two the basics. We’ll need to get some paint first though, since anything I have left lying around is liable to be dried out and useless by now.”

He wrote down a list and called one of the maids in, instructing her to send it into town so that the staff of Angel’s Share could ship the supplies back with the next load of empty wine barrels. Afterward he beckoned for Kaeya and Diluc to follow him upstairs, leading them through a door to a hallway that Kaeya hadn’t been down before.

“This door is always locked,” Diluc whispered to Kaeya as Crepus stopped in front of one of the doors and fished a key ring from his pocket. A locked door had never stopped Kaeya in the past, but his attention thus far had been more focused on the library and Master Crepus’ study when he was looking for any information that might be useful for the future. He wasn’t really completely sure what to look for anyway.

“I haven’t painted since your mother died,” Crepus told Diluc as he led the boys into what had clearly been his studio. There were a number of canvases that were already painted, and Kaeya wondered why they hadn’t been hung up like the others. “At first it was just because I was mourning her and that drained all my inspiration away, and then I suppose I just got into the habit of doing other things.”

“Eula says her Father told her that an education in the arts is important for a noble,” Diluc said, his gaze darting around the room. “Like dancing and

music."

"An appreciation for the arts is good for anyone, no matter what their background might be," Crepus informed his son firmly. "The nobility in the past did attach some significance to including some manner of artistic talent in their skill set though, Eula is right about that."

Kaeya was well aware that Diluc and Crepus were descended from a noble lineage, which he suspected was part of why he had been left here in particular. The Ragnvindr family held a large amount of power in Mondstadt and commanded respect from nearly everyone. Even as a member of the staff in their household he would have been able to leverage the esteem of the Ragnindr name, but they'd welcomed him as a guest and treated him as if he were family rather than asking him to earn his keep.

"That's not why I learned to paint though," Crepus told the two of them. "I genuinely enjoyed the process and there's a sense of accomplishment that comes from seeing the finished product and knowing that you created it." He was looking through some of the storage shelves as he spoke, although Kaeya wasn't sure what he was searching for if they had to wait on paint.

"You did some painting when you were younger," Crepus added, and Diluc looked at him in surprise.

"I did?" His father's lips quirked upward in a small smile.

"I have your artwork in my study if you'd like to see it." Abandoning his perusal of the shelves, Crepus led them back downstairs to his study. He stepped around his desk to open one of the drawers and pulled out a small stack of papers, which he offered to Diluc. Kaeya peered over the other boy's shoulder as Diluc flipped through the pages.



"These are...awful," Diluc said in a confused voice. He frowned up at his father. "Why would you keep these?" He pulled one from the stack. "This one is just handprints and smears!"

"You were very young," Crepus told him with a laugh. "You weren't even using a brush, just your fingers." Diluc flipped through the stack a bit more,

a hint of red creeping into his cheeks.

“Can we just throw these out?” he asked, hands tightening on the edge of the stack in a way that threatened to wrinkle the pages. Crepus rescued them before Diluc could do any real damage, tucking them back into his desk with another laugh.

“I’m quite fond of them, so I’d rather not.” He ruffled his son’s hair affectionately. “You can compare your new work to those later and see how much you’ve improved.”

A light knock on the door prompted the three of them to turn toward it, and Adelinde stepped into the room. She inclined her head respectfully in greeting and informed them that there was some paint that could be used even without waiting for the supplies from town. It seemed that the staff had been quietly waiting for Crepus to take up his hobby again, keeping supplies on hand and buying new paint periodically. They had donated the older paint for others to use whenever it was at risk of drying out.

Pleased by the unexpected development, Crepus had the boys follow him upstairs once more. There was a table in the middle of the room and someone had found stools the right height for Kaeya and Diluc to sit at the table while the three of them had been downstairs. There was a palette within easy reach of either stool, and a small amount of red, blue, yellow, black and white paint had been placed on it.

A number of brushes had been laid out in front of both of the stools, and as the boys climbed onto the seats that had been prepared for them, Crepus went around the table to pull some paper down from one of the shelves. He set one stack on either end of the table, encouraging Kaeya and Diluc to pull one page from the stack closer to them and place it in easy reach.

Kaeya did as instructed, a thrill of nervous anticipation humming in his veins. As much as he liked learning something new, he always worried about doing something wrong enough that it would upset Master Crepus and threaten his position in the Ragnvidr household. While he doubted that painting would have any serious risk attached, the fear of being discarded always lingered in the back of his mind. He also always tried to be careful not to do anything better than Diluc, letting Diluc have the majority of the attention and praise for any activity that the two of them engaged in.

“The first thing you want to do is get comfortable with different types of brushstrokes,” Crepus explained as the two boys examined the selection of brushes that had been laid out for them. Diluc picked one up and ran his fingers over the brush, a speculative expression on his face as he eyed it, only half listening to his father. He darted a glance at Kaeya and dipped the brush into the paint.

As soon as Crepus had turned his back to get a canvas for himself to use for demonstration purposes, Diluc ran his fingers over the brush again. This time

This time the gesture sent small flecks of paint flying at Kaeya and Diluc grinned. Kaeya was quick to retaliate, snatching a brush from the table himself, swiping it across the palette of paint, and flicking the end of it toward Diluc. A glob of yellow paint landed on Diluc's shirt and slid downward for a moment before falling to the floor, leaving a streak on the fabric.

Diluc dipped his own brush in the paint again, his hand now covered in blue as he used his fingers to launch more flecks of paint at Kaeya, liberally splattering him in small dots of blue. He was unable to stifle his giggle or the yelp that followed as Kaeya's retaliation landed a glop of cold paint against his cheek.

"That is not exactly what I had in mind when I suggested you get familiar with the brushes," Crepus said, and Kaeya froze at getting caught. However, Crepus was smiling, not reprimanding, and Diluc took advantage of Kaeya's distraction to swipe his brush along the younger boy's cheek.

Kaeya flinched at the cold, wet sensation, darting another glance at Crepus to ensure that he wasn't about to be scolded. He was watching the pair of them with an indulgent smile on his face, so Kaeya decided to follow Diluc's lead once more and swiped his brush across Diluc's arm.

"Dip your brush in the red," Crepus suggested. "You may as well learn about mixing colors while you're at it." Both boys did as recommended, Kaeya's brush leaving a three tone streak of red and yellow with somewhat

blended orange in some places as he swiped it at Diluc again. Diluc took a moment to run his hand over the brush again, mixing his paint colors slightly more effectively than Kaeya had. His next attack was mostly purple due to his effort, though there were still small streaks of blue and red in the stroke as well.

Diluc's giggles were contagious and Kaeya found himself giggling in response as he and Diluc traded swipes of paint, trying and failing to dodge one another's strikes. Kaeya had the advantage as far as the amount of paint landed on the other person, since he had gone for a loaded brush right from the start while Diluc had opted to lightly splatter him with tiny droplets of paint at first, getting paint all over his own hand in the process.

Kaeya wobbled somewhat precariously in his seat as he leaned away from Diluc's next swipe, and Diluc dropped his brush in order to grab Kaeya's arm and steady him. Crepus had started around the table in alarm, but he sighed in relief as Diluc prevented Kaeya from slipping off the stool. Diluc urged Kaeya to hop down, getting down himself and leaning over to retrieve his fallen brush.

Following Diluc's lead, Kaeya slid down from the stool as well. The moment Kaeya's feet touched the floor, a mischievous grin bloomed on Diluc's face once more and the redhead swiped his newly recovered brush down Kaeya's arm. When Kaeya attempted to strike back, Diluc took advantage of the new mobility afforded by being on the floor and jumped backward. He turned and dashed around the table, prompting Kaeya to give chase.

Giggling madly, Diluc rounded the table and dragged his brush along his father's pant leg as he ran by. Kaeya was not brave enough to follow his lead in painting Master Crepus, but he did put on a burst of speed and reached out enough to leave a streak of paint down Diluc's back. Most of the paint wound up in Diluc's hair, but he did manage to get some on Diluc's shoulder.

Despite the success of Kaeya's attack, Diluc kept running around the table rather than rounding on Kaeya to counter-attack. His father sidestepped Diluc's attempt to paint his leg a second time, which prompted more laughter from Diluc and a more persistent effort. He lunged forward, but Crepus caught him and simply lifted him into the air to prevent further paint on his clothing. Diluc changed targets and swiped the brush down his father's nose.

"I think this lesson has gotten a little away from what I intended," Crepus laughed. He retrieved the brush from Diluc and set it on the table as Diluc examined the colorful mess that his palms had become. Kaeya hovered uncertainly by the table, immediately setting his own brush back on the table when Master Crepus took Diluc's brush.

"I think you all need a bath," Adelinde said in a reprimanding tone from the doorway. She had returned with two shirts that looked rather old. "You didn't even cover their clothes!" she scolded, setting the two shirts down on one of the shelves. "I should have brought you these before I set out the paint."

"I got a little carried away watching them play," Master Crepus admitted.

He noticed Kaeya hesitating by the table and shifted Diluc onto one hip so that he could open an arm in invitation to the other boy. "Come on Kaeya, let's go get you two cleaned up." Kaeya gingerly reached out, expecting to simply hold his hand, but Master Crepus leaned over and lifted him easily to balance against his other side, one arm around either boy.

"Next time wear the smock," Adelinde told him, and he laughed again.

"I was so eager to share my old hobby that I forgot to consider the mess," he told her. She stepped aside to let him carry the boys through the doorway. "We'll try this again another day," he promised the two of them. "But for now, let's go get that paint out of your hair."

"I want bubbles in my bath!" Diluc announced, and he looked over at Kaeya. "Kaeya should have bubbles in his bath too!" Adelinde shut the studio door and started down the hall after them, a fond yet exasperated smile on her face.

"You can have bubbles if you promise not to try and skip getting your hair combed afterward," Crepus told his son. "Adelinde doesn't need to spend three hours trying to untangle it later just because you decided not to sit still while it was wet." Diluc frowned petulantly for a moment, but decided the deal was worthwhile and accepted.

Setting both boys down so that they could walk on their own, Crepus wiped his fingers down his nose in an attempt to remove some of the paint, but he only smeared it further across his face. The messy streak on his father's face set Diluc giggling again and Kaeya found himself smiling at the sight as well. He decided that he actually did want to learn about painting and he was looking forward to the first proper lesson.

End.







Feverish Daze

Merlinnski

In the distance, the church bells of Mondstadt's Cathedral rang to signify the setting of the sun. The ending of a day, and the beginning of the night.

He could hear the sound faintly through spells of dizziness and the ringing that plagued his hearing. With a trembling body, he forced his unstable legs forward, one half-lidded eye struggling to focus on the path. His face flushed a dark red, signaling an oncoming fever, and melting snow covered his form, the remnants of the trip to Dragonspine lingering well past his patrol.

What a joke, being sent on a mission to Dragonspine alone as a cryo user.
He seethed mentally, clenching his teeth as a pang of sharp pain shot through his head.

Through the muddled noise of his shuffling boots on the dirt, the kicking of small pebbles, and his coughs and sneezes, he missed the snap of a twig. Unaware, he continued onward, barely conscious. He had to keep pressing forward.

He had to make it back to Mondstadt.

The city gates were in view now, and knights normally on patrol were distracted by a flock of pigeons on the bridge. The world seemed to tilt on its axis, forcing Kaeya to grab the stone railing in order to keep him stable as he

walked past. The common birds pecked at old bread crumbs tossed by a child, fluttering their wings and taking off at the sight of the unsteady man.

The setting sun behind him faded into a familiar starry night sky, relaxing sounds of water flowed beneath the bridge and the chirps of crickets sang... All of it weighed him down far more than usual. The temptation of falling asleep where he stood was intense, but he had to resist.

He had to keep going. He was almost there.

Leaves from the bushes and trees behind him rustled loudly. Two knights standing at the gate saluted, greeting him brightly as he nodded back at them in return.

“Captain Kaeya,” they both muttered, silently judging his current appearance with narrowed gazes.

He simply walked by them, ignoring their stares. They looked away shortly after, though Kaeya couldn’t turn back and see what it was; the slightest bit of motion was enough to throw him off. Any attention paid to his surroundings was already waning the further he went.

Kaeya made it a few more steps forward, each one growing clumsier than the last. He pressed the palm of his



hand against the cold cobblestone wall of a house, his body feeling weaker by the second, and his other arm moved to hold his face as his vision darkened around the edges.

There were footsteps approaching him from behind. He heard them vaguely, the heavy footfalls of someone who wanted to reach him quickly. He turned around to face whoever it was, his legs giving out from beneath him.

He fell, the ground growing closer. Closer.

He was caught, strong arms pulling him up while his consciousness slipped through his fingers. He was out cold, limp in the stranger's hands.

Kaeya wasn't able to make it home in time. He failed.

His skull pounded, a heavy ache behind his eyes that refused to go away. It brought Kaeya back to awareness, a light groan escaping his lips at the realization. He refused to open his eyes, willing himself to fall back into a comfortable sleep.

...Comfortable? The memories of the night before flooded back to him. A trip to the harsh peak of Dragonspine, the fever that slowly but surely weakened him, his collapse on the dark streets of Mondstadt's city. So how did he manage to make his way back home, to the comfort of his bed?

The sound of a page flipping brought him back to his senses, his eyes cracked open. Through the blurry haze of his raging fever, he made out the figure of someone sitting in a chair next to his bed. Flaming red hair, black clothes with the slightest hint of gold, and a pink book with a rose on the cover. Blinking again, it cleared into the perfect image of Diluc.

The other man let out a sigh, his whole focus on the book in front of him. He didn't seem to notice Kaeya was awake, staring him down like he was nothing more than a hallucination.

“Luc?” He spoke quietly, his voice hoarse.

Diluc's attention immediately snapped up from the book, his hand quickly slamming it shut. He narrowed his eyes, a tight frown tugging his lips downwards. He leaned forwards ever so slightly, looking Kaeya up and down before opening his mouth to answer.



“Kaeya.” He furrowed his eyebrows, “How are you feeling?”

“I'm... Okay.” Kaeya hesitated, the words refusing to fall from his mouth.

“Don't lie to me.” Diluc crossed his arms against his chest, waiting for a better response.

How was he feeling, truly? There was an uncomfortable, icky sheen of sweat on his forehead, dampening his unruly hair. The room around him was spinning ever so slightly, tilted and unnatural. His entire body felt weak, he hated the feeling of being unable to move. All of this was so eerily similar to his early days at the Winery, where sickness was more often than not.

“I feel... Tired,” Kaeya confessed, laying his head back against his pillow and closing his eyes again.

The world seemed to stop spinning ever so slowly with his eyes closed. Were he not suffering from a headache and feeling so grossly overheated, he’d consider this relaxing. Just him and the darkness.

“You should be more careful, you know,” Diluc grumbled, but not without a hint of concern in his voice. “Passing out in the streets of Mondstadt isn’t safe. Neither is working while sick.”

“Ironic, coming from you.” Kaeya let out a tired chuckle, one that eventually devolved into a cough.

“Kaeya, I mean it. You should be taking better care of yourself,” Diluc stressed, keeping his voice low.

“Since when have you ever cared? Or do I need to remind you-” Kaeya was cut off, Diluc’s tone strained.

“You don’t. I already know.” Diluc paused, a heavy sigh escaping from him. “I’ve always cared, Kaeya. Though, it seems I wasn’t doing a good job if you’re believing otherwise.”

Diluc? Always caring? Kaeya would’ve scoffed at the notion were he not prone to coughing a lung out. The numerous cold remarks, the hissed words, the sharp demands for him to get out, all ran through his head at once. Diluc never cared. Diluc hated him.

Diluc hated him ever since the night of their fight. He’d made that clear since his return.

“You’re... You’re kidding. You have to be joking. That’s not funny, Master Diluc.” Kaeya forced himself up quickly, eyes wide.

His arms trembled trying to hold his weight up, the fatigue forcing him back down just as fast. He groaned, instant regret written all over his expression at the sudden movements. He shouldn’t have shot up like that.

“Kaeya, why would I be joking about this? If I didn’t care, why would I bring you back home?” Diluc seemed genuinely hurt at the notion, his voice softer than before.

“You’re serious...” Kaeya’s voice fell silent, his tired eyes growing glossy with unshed tears.

“...I’m sorry.” Diluc buried his head in his hands, the book dropped onto his lap and subsequently forgotten.

“Why did you wait this long to tell me?” Kaeya muttered, using the back of his hand to wipe at his face, just beneath his eyes.

“I realized while carrying you back home.” He bit his lip, “If you had gotten seriously hurt, I’d never forgive myself. I’ve been keeping an eye on you for a while, but you passing out was the first time I was genuinely *scared*.”

“So I’m sorry. For that night. For making you believe that I didn’t care. Because I do.” Diluc turned his head away, facing the window rather than towards Kaeya’s bewildered expression.

“I can’t believe it took me getting sick for you to apologize.” Kaeya’s rough voice filled the silence, another light laugh escaping him. “But I forgave you a long time ago.”

“Kaeya...” Diluc gave him a side glance, another look over.

There was a small smile tugging at Diluc’s lips, hardly visible in the dark. Kaeya could only just barely see it through the soft moonlight that filtered through his curtains. The thought that Diluc was smiling again warmed him.

“You should get some rest. You’re... Still sick, we can talk about this more later.” The chair was pushed further away from Kaeya’s bed, Diluc stood up and

placed the book on the now empty seat.

“If you say so, oh dearest brother of mine,” Kaeya attempted to tease, breaking out into another coughing fit instead.

“Just get some sleep. I won’t be held responsible if you somehow manage to make yourself worse.” Diluc huffed, turning his back to Kaeya.

“Yeah yeah, sure. Goodnight, ‘Luc,” Kaeya spoke quietly, rolling onto his side shortly after.

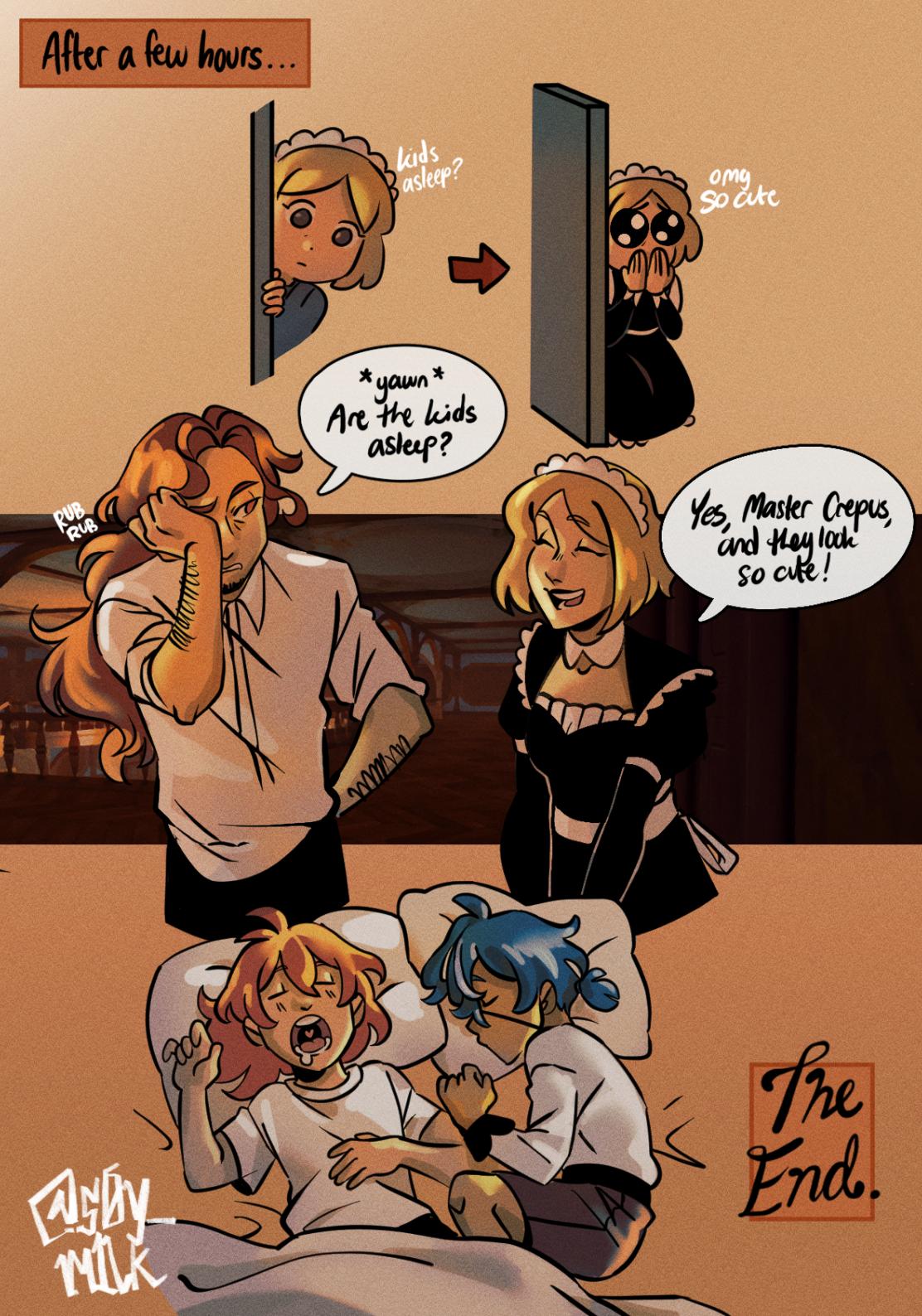
“...Goodnight, Kae. Rest well.”

End.



Jolacucessa





Christmas with the Ragnvindrs

Rain_nstuff

It was Christmas time, which brought feelings of joy and warmth... At least, for those who had family. For Kaeya, it reminded him of how he was alone, how his family was gone and he had no one left. Sure, the Ragnvindr family was nice. They treated him like family even though he was only adopted a few months ago, but it didn't feel like home. Honestly, he hardly remembered the last time he celebrated Christmas with a family. He bounced from home to home so much before here that it was hard to keep track. Would this time be any different?

Kaeya woke up the morning of Christmas eve, not expecting anything to happen... But those expectations were thrown out the window as soon as he saw Diluc running into his room and climbing into bed with him to hide under the blankets while giggling. Though it had only been a few months since Kaeya moved in, the two became friends within the first few weeks of him being there. Though things were rough at first, Diluc wasn't used to sharing his father and wasn't the friendliest to Kaeya in the beginning. With some intervention from Adeline and Crepus however, the two spent more time together and eventually bonded. They bonded so much, that they became inseparable. So, Diluc running into his room and crawling into his bed? It wasn't an uncommon occurrence.

Kaeya pulled the blankets over his head and hid with Diluc, beginning to

giggle with him. There was a sound at the door, and the two began shushing each other.

"Hmmm, I wonder... Where did Diluc go?" A deep voice said by the door. It was Crepus of course, and based on the usual behaviors... Diluc had probably woken his father up by jumping onto his bed before running off to hide. It was something that would happen every now and then. "I guess he isn't in here..." the voice said before there were "stomping" sounds as if someone were walking away.

Diluc giggled with Kaeya, thinking that their dad was gone, but within moments they felt something lay on top of them. The two boys screamed in surprise before laughing hysterically and trying to get away. Crepus laughed as he pulled the blankets off of them and greeted them. "Good morning," he smiled warmly at them both.



“Morning Father,” Diluc replied with his usual bright smile that mirrored his father’s. Kaeya started to smile too, even if it was a bit more tired than the other two’s, due to just waking up.

“Ready to go downstairs? Adeline made your favorites, waffles and pancakes with bananas and blueberries in them.” Crepus slowly got up and went to the door, glancing back at the two boys with a smile.

“WAFFLES!” Diluc shouted as he leaped out of the bed and ran past his father and went down the hall.

“Merry Christmas Kaeya, come on down when you’re ready.” Crepus left after that, leaving Kaeya to himself. If the other didn’t come downstairs in ten minutes he would come check on him for sure though.

The blue headed boy got out of bed, pulling on some fresh clothes before walking downstairs to go get breakfast. Diluc was already eating his waffles since he probably didn’t want to wait, which was totally fair. Kaeya took a seat at the kitchen table, next to Diluc as always. Crepus sat across the table from them with his cup of coffee.

“Kaeya, have you ever been ice skating?” Crepus asked with a raised brow. The man was definitely planning something, but that was unbeknownst to the young boy.

Kaeya shook his head ‘no’ before going back to eating his pancakes.

Adeline took a seat with them all, taking a break now that she had finished cleaning the kitchen. She had talked to Crepus about taking the boys ice skating while she brought up all their decorations from the basement. She had noticed the lake nearby had froze and saw kids playing on it, so she figured that they could go out there as well.

“Would you like to? It could be fun,” Crepus sipped his coffee as he waited for him to answer. Diluc was eagerly leaning towards his brother, hoping he would say yes.

“Okay.” Kaeya gave a small smile, seeing how Diluc clearly wanted to and that was enough for him to want to go.

“Alright, we’ll go once you finish your pancakes.”

Kaeya had never been ice skating before, he had seen it in movies plenty of times so he did at least know what it was. But seeing something and doing something are two separate things. He nervously sat on a bench by the lake, watching Diluc and Crepus skate around. Since they only had one pair of children’s skates, Diluc was going first. Crepus had offered for Kaeya to be the first to try, but he had refused out of feeling nervous. Eventually, Diluc skated over and sat beside him in the snow. “Your turn!” Diluc brightly smiled as he took off the skates and held them out for him to put on.

Kaeya hesitated a bit before taking the skates. Crepus was on his way over now. "You don't have to skate if you don't want to Kaeya, it's okay." Crepus knew better than to pressure a kid into doing something they didn't want to do. Besides, they were supposed to be having fun right now. Pressuring someone wasn't fun.

Kaeya inhaled deeply, he was afraid to fall down or have the ice break, but it had looked like fun. He could do this. He slowly put on the skates, which Diluc helped him to lace and tie. When he stood he wobbled, almost falling over, but Crepus caught him thankfully.

"Ready?" The elder male asked with that same warm smile that Kaeya had grown to associate with the sun. When he nodded, Crepus gently lifted him up and placed him on the ice. Kaeya scrambled a little, flailing before clutching onto Crepus.

"You're alright, just relax. I won't drop you."

"Promise?"

"I promise, and if you fall I'll help you up. You're safe Kaeya." Again the man smiled.

Diluc cheered from the sidelines, happy to watch as their father skated around with Kaeya. He did throw a few snowballs at them, which thankfully didn't cause too much trouble. Though, once Kaeya was off the ice and back in

his boots- He definitely chased Diluc around with snow in his hands to try and get him back. Crepus joined in, which eventually lead to a team up between the two boys. They threw snow back and forth all the way back to the house.

"Surrender!" Diluc shouted as he and Kaeya both tackled their father and landed in the snow. Crepus laughed, not at all minding the snow get tossed onto him by the two boys attempting to bury him in the snow. It was freezing though, and even Crepus had his limits, even if he didn't want to stop playing with the two.

Once inside the house, Adeline greeted them, coming over to help them take off their coats. "Remember to leave your shoes to dry by the door, I'll go make some hot cocoa for you." She walked off to the kitchen to begin cutting up a block of chocolate. The boys all finished taking off their snow covered clothes before going to the kitchen to wait for the hot chocolate to be made.

Adeline brought out the decorations and the group began hanging up things all around the house. Ribbons, lights, tinsel and stockings were hung everywhere by the time they finished. Then it was time for the tree. They pulled out ornaments and strings, ribbons and multicoloured lights, it was shining in colours of all sorts, not matching the house in any manner and sticking out like a sore thumb... Mostly because the boys just went crazy with the decorations from having so much fun. Adeline mostly sat by and watched them,

smiling fondly.

They stepped back to admire their work, all three of them being covered in bits of glitter from some of the ornaments. The final part however, was yet to be done. The star on top of the tree. Usually Diluc and Crepus took turns putting the star on the tree, but this year they had a new addition to the family, meaning.. Kaeya was being added to the turn order. Crepus smiled as he pulled out the star and offered it to Kaeya.

“This year is your turn, next year it will be Diluc’s, and then it will be yours again,” Crepus explained the turn order. “Just hold the star, I’ll lift you up so you can place it on top.”

Kaeya nodded and held the star in his hands, making sure to hold onto it as he was lifted up to the top of the tree by Crepus. He carefully fashioned the star on the top branch, struggling a little to get it to stay, but eventually managing. He smiled once he was back on the ground, stepping back with the others to admire their work.

“Now, last thing we have to do is bake cookies for Santa,” Crepus announced, watching as the boys excitedly ran off to the kitchen to go do that.

Now, baking cookies in the Ragnvindr family was a bit chaotic. The kitchen could hold ten people, but that didn’t prevent the three from bumping into

each other as they rushed around the kitchen to grab ingredients. They were making three types of cookies since “Santa may not like one type” according to Kaeya, which everyone agreed with. So they set about making the cookies, rolling out two different kinds of dough. Of course, they ate some of the dough, not being able to resist. Even Crepus joined in on stealing some dough, which ended in the boys scolding him for not sharing.



Eventually, while cleaning up some of the excess flour, Crepus accidentally ruffled Diluc’s hair before he had dusted off his hands. This caused Diluc to dip his hand in flour and wipe it off on his father. Kaeya laughed as they began going back and forth, soon joining in by tossing some flour at them both. Crepus would have scolded him for it, if not for the look of pure joy on Kaeya’s face. This didn’t last long though because Adeline knew better than to leave them

unsupervised. When she walked in her jaw dropped slightly, was she surprised? Of course not, but was she going to clean this up? Hell no. This was all them. She gave Crepus a look, then sighed softly at the boys. How could she stay mad at them? They were all clearly happy.

“Alright clean this up, then it’s time to set out the cookies and get ready for bed,” Adeline shook her head as she grabbed the broom and held it out to Crepus, who smiled apologetically. He wasn’t going to make Adeline clean this up, especially when this all could have been avoided.

“Alright boys you heard Adeline. Clean up.”

“Hey! You started it!”

“Yeah! You should clean too!”

Crepus laughed at their responses, nodding as he began sweeping the floors. He had been joking of course. The three continued to clean for half an hour, the time being short because they were all working as a team.

They went to the livingroom with the cookies and of course a few carrots for the reindeer. They set them out on the coffee table in the center. The three cookie types, if you were wondering, were chocolate chip, sugar and molasses. They were all carefully placed on the plate with the carrots. Kaeya lingered a little by the fireplace, looking up the chimney curiously as if Santa would come down this instant. Diluc joined him, looking up through the chute. “He’s gonna

come down through the chimney and eat the cookies,” Diluc declared, smiling as he stepped back to look at his father.

“Now, lets get you both cleaned up and in bed.” Crepus ushered them up the stairs, poking them playfully to get them to move faster. He drew up baths for them both, allowing them to clean up on their own since they were old enough to handle that, at least most of the time.

When they were tucked into bed, Crepus went to both of them to say good-night. He went to Kaeya first this time, sitting on the edge of the bed and smiling lightly at him. “I hope you had fun today Kaeya, I know I did.” He winked, leaning down and kissing him on the head. “Now try to get some sleep, I’ll see you in the morning.” He got up to leave.

“Mister Ra- I mean, dad?” Kaeya called out to him. He was still getting used to calling Crepus dad, not that anyone was expecting him to or forcing that. After all, the last thing they want to do is make Kaeya do something that he doesn’t want.

“Yes Kaeya?” Crepus turned to face him.

“Thank you.”

“Of course Kaeya, I love you. Now get some sleep.” He walked out to go say good night to Diluc.

Now, it's something to note that Diluc had snuck into Kaeya's room to have a sleepover, and as always, Diluc woke up first. He gently nudged Kaeya to wake him, smiling brightly when the other opened his eyes. "It's Christmas!" He cheered, crawling over him to get out of bed, Kaeya was soon to follow him. Crepus heard them waking up, smiling to himself as he got out of bed to join them downstairs.

"SANTA WAS HERE!" Diluc could be heard shouting from the livingroom.

"Of course he was, you have both been good this year," Crepus walked into the room with a cup of coffee he had grabbed on the way. "Lets see here..." He walked over to the gift piles and pretended to look around. "It seems this pile is for Kaeya and this one is for Diluc." He pointed to the piles he mentioned.

The two boys went to open their gifts, smiling joyously as they tore through the wrapping paper and flung it at each other with laughs. Crepus watched them, his heart filled with love for these two wonderful children he had been blessed with. He discreetly took photos of them both, wanting to save the memories. Call him cliche, but he liked to be able to capture these moments to look back on later.

"This one says... To: Diluc and Kaeya," one of the boys read out as they brought it over to the middle of the floor.

"Well, that probably means it's for both of you." Crepus sipped his coffee.

Kaeya and Diluc began tearing away the wrapping paper, revealing a few distinct things. There were two wooden swords, a boardgame and matching plush toys. The two of them inspected the boardgame and chattered about how excited they were.

"Diluc, don't you have something for Kaeya?" Crepus prompted the redhead, who immediately shot up to go run and grab whatever it was. Kaeya was left sitting there, a little confused as to what Crepus was talking about. What had he meant? His questions would soon be answered when Diluc came back, holding a wrapped gift. Kaeya took the gift that was offered to him, looking a bit confused.

"I made it for you," Diluc eagerly watched the other unwrap his gift.

When Kaeya looked inside, he saw a picture frame with macaroni glued all over it in attempted circle patterns. At the bottom of the frame in rather bad handwriting was "**Brothers Forever**". Inside the frame was a drawing. There was a house with two stick figures, one was blue and the other was red, they were holding hands with a heart around them. There were attempted drawings of calla lilies and lamp grass along the sides.

Kaeya didn't know what to say, he sat there for a moment staring at the drawing before gently tracing the macaroni. They were brothers?

Kaeya knew they were *technically* siblings according to Crepus, but he also never felt like one of the family. At least... Not until very recently. So being told that they are brothers from his best friend in the whole world? How could he describe how much it meant to him? He sniffled a little, eyes watering from the emotions he felt. He was loved and cared for here and that feeling was so overwhelming, but it was also such a wonderful feeling.

“Kaeya-” Diluc sounded concerned as he gently wrapped his arms around him. “Don’t cry, I’m sorry- Do you not like it?”

Kaeya shook his head and clung to his brother. Yes. Brother. That word held so much meaning coming from Diluc. “Thank you Diluc” Kaeya managed to tell him, wiping away his tears.

Crepus joined them on the floor, hugging them both close and kissing both of their heads. “Merry Christmas boys, I love you both dearly.”

Kaeya stretched as he got out of bed. It was Christmas again. He had already gotten the dough for cookies done the night before, and of course the decorations were out and ready to be set up. He looked over at the nightstand, reaching over and picking up a picture frame. Some of the macaroni had fallen off over the years and the drawing had begun to fade from sun exposure, but it was very clearly the same gift that he had gotten for his first Christmas twenty

twenty years ago.

He heard his phone buzz and set the frame down, picking up his phone and reading the text. He smiled lightly at it.

“Will be there soon, just picking up those ingredients you wanted for dinner” - Diluc.

“Alright. See you soon.”

End.





As It Was

Ruby

Diluc is not an early riser. Due to his activities as the DarkKnight hero, he arrives home extremely early in the morning and sleeps till late in the afternoon. Adelinde, being the wonder that she is, allows him to do so as long as he doesn't have a meeting. He typically awakens to the sound of the wind howling and birds chirping outside.

Today, however, he woke up way too early to the sounds of conversation. He had gotten home at 4 a.m, with blood on him that certainly wasn't his own, covering his torso and skin. He spent way too much time scrubbing off the blood in the shower, and as the adrenaline drained, pain bloomed on his side.

Now, it was 8 a.m, and he only got 3 hours of sleep. He made an effort to block out the noise, putting a pillow over his head and groaning angrily. Just then, there was laughter, and he remembered how he would wake up to Father and Adelinde laughing together as they had their morning coffee. Father, however, had passed away years ago, so he was now merely irritated and wanted to go back to sleep.

He finally decided to investigate what was going on. He grimaced when he sat up and noticed the purple and blue bruises on his ribs. The injury caught him off guard even though he was aware that it wasn't something major. He didn't even attempt to straighten his hair, which was knotted due



to his unwillingness to put it up before falling asleep. All he did was throw on a shirt and shorts, tie his hair up before leaving his room and gaze over the mezzanine.

He certainly wasn't expecting to see Diona, Klee, and Kaeya enjoying pancakes at his dining room table. Kaeya raised his glass of orange juice as he noticed the nobleman.

"Ah! The Sleeping Beauty is awake! Good morning, Master Diluc." Kaeya said, and Diluc scowled. Klee gasped and leapt off her seat, sprinting up the stairs to give Diluc a hug. However, she was much shorter than him so she just hugged his legs.

"Mr. Diluc!" The redhead struggled to maintain his balance as she clung to his legs. He knelt down and scooped her up so she could hug him properly.

"Good morning, Klee." His voice was scratchy from sleep as he spoke. She had her arms around his neck as she gave him a hug, talking about nonsense which Diluc ignored.

"Did you tell me you were coming today?" Diluc asked, glancing at Kaeya.



Said man shook his head as he grinned brightly.

"Nope! Klee suggested that they go to the beach for their playdate with Diona. I thought you would like to join us." Kaeya told him as Diluc sat Klee down in her seat. At that point, he realized that everyone was dressed in bathing suits, and Kaeya had a bag with towels, an umbrella, sunscreen, and other items. Diluc paused for a moment before replying,

"I'm not sure if I'm able to go. I mean, I just woke up- I haven't even looked at my daily schedule yet." He said as Adelinde came into the room with a plate for him.

"What am I doing this afternoon, Adelinde? Elzer informed me about a wine tasting, and I'm pretty sure I have to attend-

"Oh, I cleared your schedule. You're going."

She answered so quickly that Diluc felt like he had just gotten whiplash. Kaeya snorted before he burst out laughing. He silently stared at Adelinde in betrayal, his mouth open. He grumbled as he bit into his pancakes, and she gave him a cheeky smirk. Kaeya stood and walked over to Diluc and Adelinde.

"Come on, Diluc. You don't want to hang out with your little brother for the day?" He remarked as he gave him a pat on the back. Diluc felt his face burn with embarrassment.

"It's not that I don't want to, I- I just-" He was interrupted when Kaeya ruffled his already knotted hair.

"Diluc, I'm only teasing you. Hurry up and eat. Diona and Klee will ruin this place if you take too long, so you need to get ready." Kaeya said, and the older man grumbled and fixed his hair. Adelinde grabbed his plate as he went upstairs to change. Klee and Diona ran past Diluc as he left his room.

"It's time to leave, girls! Please say thank you to Adelinde!" The two rushed downstairs to say goodbye and thank her after Kaeya told them, with Klee making sure to give her a hug. Kaeya grinned as the redhead, who was still half asleep, walked over. The Cavalry Captain gave Diluc a harsh pat on the back as he grumbled.

"You'll be fine, it'll be fun!" Kaeya said, leading the two girls outside. Diluc gave Adelinde a pleading look as she approached, which she sighed at.

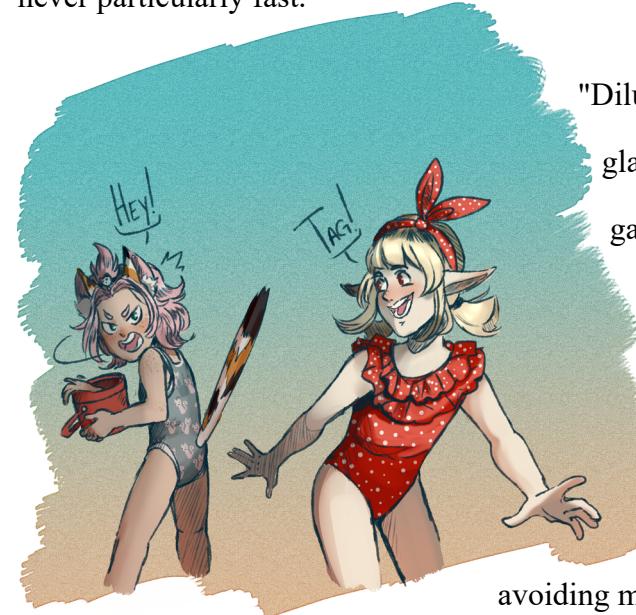
"You need to socialize with more people and get some sun. You'll have a wonderful time." She told him and he sighed before Klee tugged on his shirt.

"Mr. Diluc! Are you interested in learning more about my bombs?" Klee asked with a warm smile on her face. Standing behind her, Kaeya and Diona shook their heads, but Diluc nodded hesitantly. Klee gasped, her eyes widening. Diona just sighed, covering her ears.

Diluc had been persuaded by Klee to pick her up so she could describe her

bombs on the walk, which must have taken around thirty minutes. She continued as they headed to the water, recalling her brand new bombs that she could use for fishing. Evidently, they were waterproof. Diluc had merely smiled and nodded without saying anything. Then Klee squirmed free of his grasp and jumped to the ground, tagging Diona as she did so.

"Tag! You're it!" She said before running off. Gasping, Diona shouted, "Hey! Not fair!" Diluc watched the two rush off and smiled. He was reminded of the days when he and Kaeya would do the same. Crepus would urge them to wait up and attempt to catch up with them by jogging, but he was older and never particularly fast.



"Diluc," Kaeya said, and Diluc glanced at Kaeya with a gentle gaze. "They aren't us."

Diluc blinked in surprise and turned to see Klee and Diona laughing and running in the sand. He inhaled sharply,

avoiding making eye contact.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I just-"

"I had the same thought, but I don't want you to treat them any differently

because you think they might end up like us. Like you could make something right before it happens." Kaeya said. Diluc nodded as he headed toward the two girls were.

"It's just- even the notion of someone else going through what you or I went through makes me feel uneasy." After Diluc admitted it, Kaeya's demeanor changed.

"I understand. However, you should focus on enjoying today rather than worrying about the things that make you anxious." Kaeya told him, trying to read Diluc's facial expression, but it had barely changed

"Alright, I'll try." Diluc chuckled, and then Diona yelled at Diluc.

"Master Diluc, come over here and carry our seashells!" Klee giggled as Diona shouted. Diluc sighed and shot Kaeya a glance, but Kaeya only chuckled. "Go ahead; I'll get ready. Just don't wander too far."

Klee offered Diluc her seashells as he drew closer. He used his shirt to hold the shells, Diona having left the bucket when Klee tagged her. Diluc followed the girls as they ran down the beach while remaining quiet as they laughed.

"C'mon, Luc!" Kaeya called, running down the beach and collecting seashells. "Wait up! I can't run that fast!" Diluc shouted, rushing after him and panting. The two must have been 7 or 8 years old; Diluc hadn't gained his vision yet. Diluc's face was already getting sunburned, but that's how it had

always been. He didn't tan; he just burned. "How are you going to join the Knights if you can't run fast? Silly!" Kaeya teased.

Running had never been Diluc's specialty. Diluc had the violence and brute force to defeat the attacker, whereas Kaeya was the one who could quickly parry and dodge attacks. They were an excellent team, but after Diluc's birthday, they were never able to fight together again.

Luc held out a bucket, which Kae promptly threw the shells into, giggling and rushing along. The water was so pretty, and he could feel the cool of it against his feet as a wave came up to his feet. "You wanna go in the water, Luc?" Kaeya asked, and Diluc shook his head. "No. I still need to learn how to swim. Father is getting me swimming lessons!"



He still couldn't swim.

When the swimming instructor unexpectedly had to travel, Crepus forgot about it, and Diluc never learned how since he was forced to join the Knights after obtaining

vision a few years later. His visit to Snezhnaya just made him afraid of the water. The ice was thick, but not thick enough. Some parts would break underneath enough weight, and it was so cold that the water would just freeze back over, so you couldn't find your way out and you *couldn't breathe* and-

Diluc has never liked swimming since then.

He was startled out of his trance when Kaeya walked over next to him. He took a seashell from his shirt and looked at it closely. It was a brilliant, light blue color. Diluc had been led in a circle by Klee and Diona, and he was now back at his starting point with the towels and umbrella put up. As he dusted his shirt, Diluc dropped the shells onto the towels.

"Oh! Oh! Look at this, Diona! That one as well! That one, too!" Klee pointed out all the shells that caught her attention.

Kaeya saw the change in Diluc's expression as he and Diluc watched in silence. Kaeya took a blue shell and studied how the light made it glitter. Diluc's attention moved from them to the ocean. "I remember how the shells we collected were always blue and matched me, and we searched for red shells to match you for hours on end with no luck." Kaeya reminisced, hearing a breathless laugh from Diluc. After sorting through every seashell, Klee and Diona raced back to the water in search of more. They merely ended up laughing and splashing each other with water. As the sun began to set, the brothers watched as they leaned back on their hands.

"..Kaeya?"

"Yes, Diluc?"

"I'm.." Diluc swallowed hard and said, "I'm sorry. For everything."

Kaeya didn't say anything, which made Diluc anxious, so he kept talking.

"For leaving you for so long. For- for hurting you. For being so distant. For not protecting Father-"

"Diluc, *please*. You have to stop blaming yourself. It's not your fault, nothing that happened to him was," Kaeya said, turning to look at Diluc, whose eyes were glossy. "I shouldn't have confessed to you that same night, and I'm sorry for that. I truly am. I forced your hand when you weren't in the right mindset to deal with my secret. It was selfish of me, so stop trying to take all the blame." The Cavalry Captain's voice was stern but caring.

"I understand why you're distant; it's because when Crepus-"

"*Father*. He's your father too." Diluc choked out, his voice breaking as he did. Kaeya hesitated before nodding and shifting his gaze to the sun on the horizon.

"Right. When..*Father* passed away, everything changed for you within the span of 24 hours. You left without ever getting a chance to grieve. Change has never been your favorite thing. So, when you got back to Mondstat, you found

everything had changed. You didn't feel at home." He concluded, looking at his brother, who had turned his head away. "It's not your fault. Nothing that happened is. Stop trying to blame yourself."

He could see Diluc's walls breaking. When he went to speak, all that came out was a choked sob.

Kaeya could count the amount of times that he has seen Diluc cry on one hand.

The first was when the two were playing and discovered a dead bird nearby the winery grounds. Diluc had sobbed his eyes out over a bird he only learned of because of it's death. He had always been a bird person. The second time was when he broke his leg on a mission in Dragonspine when he was 14 and had just been made Cavalry Captain. Kaeya remembers that way too vividly. Diluc was trying his hardest not to cry, but Kaeya could see the bone. He still to this day had a limp that he managed to hide, but Kaeya noticed. The third time was when Father died. Diluc was begging Father to move as his dull, lifeless eyes stared up at the sky, shaking him desperately. The Knights tried to pull him off his cold body, but he wouldn't move. Kaeya watched, unable to go comfort his brother, even as his brother kicked and screamed as the knights dragged him away. The fourth was when he stayed the night at the winery and found Adelinde comforting Diluc after what seemed to be a terrible nightmare. It seemed like a common occurrence, since Adelinde knew exactly how to calm him down. He

kept muttering about Father and that night, and Kaeya left before the two noticed him. Guilt weighed heavy on his shoulders then; it still did.

And now, Diluc openly sobbed into his calloused, scarred hands while covering his face. Kaeya quickly gave his brother a warm hug. In order to stifle his cries, the redhead gripped the back of Kaeya's shirt and buried his face in it. It was excruciating to hear. Kaeya himself was unable to hold back his tears.

"It's alright. It's going to be okay." Kaeya said, voice breaking. In the distance, laughing carelessly while drenching each other with water, were Klee and Diona. Diluc muttered his apologies while cradling Kaeya in his arms out of fear of losing him once more. The two took a few minutes to settle down, with Kaeya separating first to wipe Diluc's face. The nobleman laughed, his eyes red from crying.

"I'm.. I'm the oldest; I should be comforting you, not the other way around," Diluc said. The Cavalry Captain simply chuckled. They noticed Klee and Diona were running back, so the brothers wiped their faces, and attempted to hide their past tears.

"Come on, Mr. Diluc! Let's go in the water! It's a blast!" Kaeya's shirt was being tugged at by Diona while Klee tugged on Diluc's. "You as well, Mr. Kaeya!" After laughing, Kaeya stood up and followed her to the water. Klee suddenly paused and looked at him, asking,

"Mister Diluc, were you crying?" She asked, and he was speechless before coming up with an excuse.

"No, no, it's saltwater. And Kaeya told me a really funny joke that only adults would understand, so I laughed very hard." He explained, and Klee didn't respond for a second, and Diluc thought he had come up with a bad lie, but she then grinned and nodded. "Okay!"

The water was chilly and reached Diluc's knees when he joined Kaeya. Both smiled as they watched the two girls swim around them. He remembers how Crepus would toss them up and they would land in the water, popping right back up and asking him to throw them again. How Crepus would sit on the beach with them for hours and hours when he should've been running the Winery, but he put his sons first. It was so simple then. He wished it could be like that forever, just the three of them spending time together, forgetting the rest of the world exists. But that was a fantasy that would live in the back of Diluc's mind. One that would never come true.

"I missed this," Diluc admitted as he turned to face his brother, who was sifting through the sand. Kaeya had a shocked expression, and Diluc moved closer as he observed Kaeya. He straightened, water dripping from his hands. Something was in his closed fist, and he took Diluc's hand. He handed it to the redhead and said,



"Luc, look. We finally found one that matches your eyes."

Diluc blinked in surprise, then smiled as he saw the vivid red shell in his hands.

End.





Anonymous
KeRiZaReT

The boy Father brought home doesn't talk.

At least, Diluc hasn't heard him talk yet.

True, he's been mostly kept out of the guestroom, because the boy was sick for the first few days of his stay. But it's been over a week now, and the newcomer was getting better – yet still not uttering a word.

Diluc doubts anyone in the house has heard him say anything. He never answered with more than a shake of a head. The maids have been gossiping, when they thought Father wasn't there, that maybe the boy couldn't talk at all. Crepus always scolded them for it.

When Diluc asked him about it, he looked troubled, but smiled down at him.

"Our guest is just very shy, strawberry. We need to give the boy some time."

'The boy' – that's what everyone in the Winery calls him, because he didn't even share his name. Diluc thinks it's extremely unfair. He wouldn't want to be called just "the boy", as if he was just any boy there is. As if he wasn't special.

This boy, though – he's very special. In fact, Diluc is sure he's *the most* unusual person he's ever met. From all the people he's seen, the newcomer's



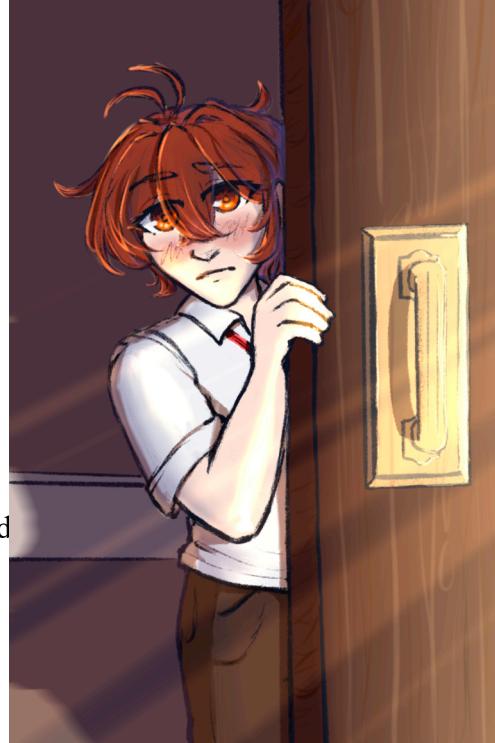
looks are the most exotic. Surely that made him the most *exceptional* boy, at least in Mondstadt.

That's why Diluc decided to call him 'Storm Boy' in his mind, after the storm Father found him in, at least until they learned what to call him. Or, until he comes up with a better nickname. Maybe something to do with his singular, starry eye...

Said starry eye locks with his red ones and Diluc realizes belatedly that he might've been staring at the newcomer for too long.

He flushes, caught peeking, and walks out from behind the guestroom's door awkwardly. He closes it behind himself, hovering close, unsure whether walking deeper inside won't scare Storm Boy too much.

The guest observes him warily from where he's sitting in bed. He rarely leaves the room, since he's still recovering from the sickness. If he does, it's always when nobody's looking, rushing back if he's seen outside as if he'd done something wrong. Yet for some reason he hasn't accepted Diluc's offers to play outside together.



Father told Diluc to give Storm Boy time to get used to them. He brought him some children's books to read so that he isn't bored alone.

He seemed to be reading one now, before he noticed someone observing him and set it aside. His full attention is now on Diluc.

Diluc bites his lip, uneasy.

"Um. Are you... feeling better now?" He asks eventually.

A nod. That's a good start.

"That's great!" He smiles. Storm Boy hugs his covers closer. "Uh, are you still cold? Do you need something to warm up? I can bring you a sweater – or another blanket!"

Feeling more confident, he starts walking closer to the bed, but Storm Boy flinches and leans away. Diluc freezes in place and puts a hand to his mouth. He forgot Father told him not to be too sudden around their guest because it scared him.

"Sorry," he mumbles, "I didn't mean to startle you."

Storm Boy just stares. Diluc fidgets with his fingers, desperate to get rid of the growing awkwardness in the room.

"I, uh. Well... If you don't want blankets, maybe I can ask Addie to make

you something warm to drink? ...Do you like hot chocolate?"

The guest tilts his head, interested, but clearly confused.

Diluc's jaw drops.

"You never drank it?"

A shake of a head. Something sparkles in Diluc's eye.

"You should definitely try it, then! It's sooo good."

He subconsciously advances more towards the bed, slowly, and can now see Storm Boy closer. He seems to be dropping his guard, not running away when Diluc reaches the frame of the bed and stops.

"And you know, Addie makes *the best* hot choco ever. She makes me a cup when it's winter and it warms me up really well!"

The boy hesitates a bit, then nods. Diluc beams.

"Alright, I'll ask her to make you one for dinner then, and—" he pauses, suddenly remembering why he came upstairs at all.

"Oh, right. About dinner." He smiles down at Storm Boy. "Father said it'll be ready soon and told me to ask you whether you wanted to eat with us tonight?"

All he gets in response are furrowed eyebrows.

"I mean, you always eat all alone here in bed because you were too sick... but since you're feeling better now, you could come sit with us at the dining table if you wanna."

The boy looks at him for a bit, mulling something over.

It's then that he opens his mouth, and Diluc's eyes widen thinking he'll actually hear the boy talk for the first time... but the boy catches his expression and seems to realize what he's doing. He clenches his jaw shut again and bites his lip, preventing himself even more from uttering a sound.

Like he's *scared*.

His eyes dart to the side, visibly troubled. Diluc is about to suggest something, when Storm Boy suddenly gets up from bed, rigid and determined, and starts walking towards the door.

"H-huh? Wait!"

Diluc runs up to him and waves his hands in front of himself.

"No, you don't need to walk down right now! It'll still be a while until we'll be eating. You can relax and we'll call you down when everything's ready."

Storm Boy glances at him, unconvinced and Diluc realizes that he forgot one major detail.

They still haven't learnt the guest's name. How could they call for him without knowing it?

"Oh yeah. Um," He begins unsurely, "You didn't tell us your name. So I'm not sure *what* to call you."

Storm Boy's eye widens, like he never realized that. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, but no sound comes out. He seems to change his mind every second. With each failure, his expression just grows more and more discouraged and he glances at Diluc again, eye apologetic – almost fearful of his reaction.

Diluc panics, waving placatingly.

"Don't worry!" He places a hand on Storm Boy's shoulder reassuringly. "I mean, you don't need to tell us right now! Only when you want to. It'd just be easier, I guess..."

He ponders for a moment, observed by that single, silent eye.

"Well... it doesn't have to be your name exactly, right?" he realizes then, "Maybe there's something else we can call you? Some nicknames?"

The boy's lips twitch down in uncertainty.

"Like..." Diluc wonders how to explain it, "My dad calls me '*strawberry*'. You know, because of my red hair! And because it's cute. So, if we do the same for you... you could be '*blueberry*'?"

The longer Diluc talks, the more twisted the frown on Storm Boy's face appears, visibly not understanding. Diluc stops and observes him.

"Do you... not know blueberries either...?"

He doesn't miss the flash of distress in that starry eye before Storm Boy's face shoots down to the floor shamefully. His hands clench tightly on his shirt. He shrugs.

"No, no, that's fine! We can use something else. Uh... maybe... How do you like '*Bluey*'? ...No? '*Starlight*'...?"

Diluc knows he went too far when Storm Boy's posture completely closes off, his expression almost empty when he looks up. He turns away quickly, waving a hand dismissively in a half-shrug.

Diluc backs off. He clearly overwhelmed the guest, but he's unsure how to continue now. He really wants to know his name, but it seems impossible to get it out of the tanned boy. Everything Diluc seems to try to do to get them to communicate backfires and only makes it worse.

Was there no way for them to make contact at all?

....

Unless...

He perks up with excited noise. Storm Boy startles, face baffled as Diluc squeezes his hand and gestures for him not to move.

"Wait, wait, I have a great idea! Stay here, okay? I'll just— run and get something really quickly."

With that, he runs out of the room, not looking to see if Storm Boy listened.

Sprinting into his own bedroom, he rummages through the desk, grabbing crayons and a few stray pieces of paper. With those in hand, he darts back to Storm Boy, only to see there was no need to rush. The guest is still standing in the exact same place with a perplexed expression.

Diluc heads up to the small table next to the bed.

"Here!" he gestures for the boy to approach, showing him the clear sheet and holding out one crayon for him to hold. The guest takes it tentatively. "Now you can write your name down, if you don't want to say it!"

Diluc praises himself inwardly for his genius plan. Surely nothing could go wrong now?

And yet, Storm Boy hesitates.

He glances at Diluc unsurely. Diluc only tilts his head, motioning towards the page in what he hopes is an encouraging gesture. It must work, because the blue-haired boy sits down in front of the table and holds the crayon to the sheet.

A second, two of complete silence pass... and then the tanned hand begins moving along the page.

Diluc observes with interest as unconfident strokes slowly start to leave behind big, wobbly letters. The boy's handwriting is messed up and he seems insecure about jotting anything down at all. Almost as if he *couldn't* actually do it.

But that would be absurd. This boy should be somewhere around his age. He must have been taught to write by now, no?

Storm Boy finishes the last letter, but still looks over the paper with evident worry. Diluc leans over and frowns, trying to decipher the shaky alphabets.

"Oh!"

He smiles in triumph. He knew this was a good idea.

"So your name is '*Xaya*'! That's really pretty!"



Xaya's face immediately falls and grows troubled – borderline *scared*. He quickly grabs the crayon again and with even more sudden movements he crosses the name out, immediately beginning to write a new one.

“Oh...” Diluc is a bit put off, “So not *Xaya* then.”

The repeated mention of the name only seems to distress 'Xaya' again. His writing gets frantic, and consequently grows more and more uneven.

“Uh, hey— It’s fine, you don’t have to be so worried...”

Storm Boy ignores him and instead moves the sheet toward him again, almost desperately. A new name is already written on it. Diluc eyes it, a tad confused since it looks very similar to the one before. Maybe the pronunciation changed?

“Uh... ‘*Xeya*’, is it?”

Xeya only bites his lip, clearly upset. He grips the crayon really tight. His hand shakes when he tries to put something similar to the letter ‘*a*’ between ‘*x*’ and ‘*e*’.

Diluc sweats.

“*X-Xaeya*’...?”

He glances at Xaeya for confirmation, only for his heart to clench when he's

met with the sight of held back tears. The paper rips with how violently the tanned boy crosses out the letters, staring at the page with heartbreaking helplessness. His lower lip is trembling.

Diluc reaches out a hand hesitantly, hoping to placate him before he completely breaks down.

“It’s— it’s okay, don’t worry about it! You don’t need to do it right now – we can wait until you learn your letters better—”

The second his hand lands on 'Xaeya's' shoulder, the boy shoots up from the chair, making Diluc flinch away in shock. The guest doesn't pause and immediately runs for the door, escaping the redhead's outstretched hand and pleads to wait.

In an instant, 'Xaeya' is gone from the room, his sprinting footsteps surprisingly fast and so quiet Diluc doesn't even hear them.

For someone still recovering from an illness, he's in good form, but Diluc still worries it won't last. What if he gets lost? The Winery is a really big place and 'Xaeya' is so small. It'll be hard to find him. What if he gets sick again from the strain and nobody's there with him?

He seems so scared all the time. Diluc can't just leave him alone.

He quickly grabs the leftover paper and crayons and sprints out after him,

but the boy has already disappeared. The knot inside Diluc's gut tightens. What will Father think if he finds out his son scared their guest away? If something happens to 'Xaeya'? He'll get in trouble for bothering him and won't be allowed near him anymore!

He has to find the boy and apologize quickly.

Carefully, making sure Father is out of earshot, he questions the maids whether they've seen the boy go anywhere. Yet although some of them saw him momentarily, none knew where he went.

None except for Adelinde.

"I believe I saw our guest run outside not two minutes ago. He shouldn't have gone off too far."

He thanks her and is in turn met with an encouraging smile.

"I will postpone the dinner. Please take care of the boy well if you happen to find him, Master Diluc."

"I will!"

With that, he finds himself outside, looking out at the vineyards. Having himself often ran away from the maids into the leaves, Diluc knows they are a great hiding spot. 'Xaeya' couldn't have run away further than the Winery's borders, so that's probably where he is.

Especially since there are... so many of them.

Repeating to himself not to get discouraged, he steps in between the branches, carefully glancing around. This shouldn't be too hard. The maids always managed to find him eventually. He just needs to watch out for any possible signs of movement or voice.

It's only after at least ten minutes of searching, though, that he hears a silent rustle from somewhere to his right. He turns in time to see a crystalfly is hurriedly flying away from where a few branches are swaying unnaturally, despite there being no wind.

As if someone shooed the creature away.

Diluc carefully parts away leaves to uncover the spot. From between the grapes, a starry eye meets his own, wide with alertness. The tense, tanned hand is still raised.

Diluc smiles with a sigh of relief.

"There you are."

The guest says nothing. He looks like a cornered animal; ready to either flee or be hunted. As Diluc tries to take a step closer, 'Xaeya' twitches, ready to run, and the redhead stops in his tracks.

"Sorry, I don't want to scare you," he backs away, keeping his distance.

"I didn't before, either. You just... worried me when you ran away. I thought you could get lost, or sick."

He slowly lowers himself to the ground, sitting across 'Xaeya' and placing the papers and crayons on the grass in their hands' reach. At the sight of them, Storm Boy starts lifting himself up.

"Don't worry! These are not for writing!" Diluc waves a placating hand, "I won't force you to do anything anymore, promise."

He puts a hand to his heart. The boy eyes the crayons doubtfully, so Diluc lifts one up.

"Everyone would be worried if I left you and didn't know where you are. So I should keep an eye on you, at least while you're outside the house. But I also don't want to bother you, so I brought these for myself to draw. And more paper, in case you want to try, too."

He fidgets when the boy doesn't move, just keeps staring at him relentlessly with that starry pupil. His eyes fall down to avoid the intense gaze. He lays a sheet on the soil and starts sketching.

"You— um, you don't need to draw if you don't wanna. You don't even have to stay here. I know I kinda made you sad. Just... if you leave, go inside the house so that the others won't worry."

For a while there's no other sound other than that of his crayon on the paper. When the leaves rustle again, Diluc thinks it's because the boy is getting up to leave.

Then, there's a shuffle of paper in front of him. Diluc looks up, surprised, to see the boy grab a crayon and start drawing as well. Their eyes lock.

And, for the first time, 'Xaeya' smiles at him.

Diluc can't help but reciprocate.

They sit a while in this comfortable silence, each of them busy with their own drawing. Until, at some point, Diluc hears Storm Boy's sketching pause. When it doesn't pick up for the next minute, he shoots him a glance.

'Xaeya' is curiously peeking at Diluc's drawing. When he notices he's been caught, he quickly turns back to his own paper.

"You can look if you want," Diluc picks his picture up and displays it to his companion with a grin.

The boy blinks at the drawing, and then—

He snickers.

His head turns away to hide the giggles that escape him and Diluc stares at him for a moment, shocked.

He *actually* made 'Xaeya' laugh. He actually *heard* him.

And oh, how *nice* it is to listen to him.

However, he can't help but let out an offended chuckle when he understands *why* Storm Boy's laughing. "Are you— laughing at my drawing? Is it *that* bad?"

The boy covers his mouth, clearly worried about upsetting him but also unable to stop laughing. Diluc nudges him with a shoulder playfully to show that it's fine.

"Alright, it's a bit messy... but you can see who this is! That's what counts, right?"

The boy doesn't nod like he usually would. Before Diluc can start thinking that it really is that bad, though, 'Xaeya' raises his hand and points at the drawn red-headed figure.

He hesitates, and then he says – *says!!* – quietly:

"Di...luc."

Diluc *really* tries not to gape.

Because... the boy actually *talked!* And his voice is sooo pretty, even though he pronounced the name a bit strangely.

And to think his first word is Diluc's name... it somehow makes him

extremely proud.

He hopes his momentary silence at this unexpected turn didn't make the boy uncomfortable as he finally makes himself reply.

"Yeah! That's me!"

The boy nods, then points at the second figure in Diluc's drawing – himself – and says:

"*Kaeya.*"

Diluc sucks in a breath to stifle a gasp.

So *that* was it.

"*Kaeya*," he repeats almost tentatively, testing how it rolls off his tongue.

"Is that your name?"

A nod. Diluc repeats it again, to get *Kaeya's* (!!) approval on pronunciation.

"Your name is so pretty, Kaeya. I've never heard of it before. It means it's special, like you!"

Kaeya scratches his neck sheepishly. He pauses when a hand is held out right in front of his face.

Diluc beams. "Nice to meet you, Kaeya!"

The smile he gets back is slightly awkward, but genuine. They shake hands.

"Nice... to meet you, Diluc."

After that, they simply draw for a while more in silence, just comfortable in the presence of a new friend. Yet after a moment, Diluc notices that Kaeya isn't sketching – instead, he seems to be struggling to secretly write his name on paper again.

"Do you want me to write it for you?" he suggests.

Shamefully, Kaeya hands him the page.

"Hey, don't feel bad!" Diluc pats his shoulder. "I struggled to write at first, too. You're actually doing really well! But if you want, I can tutor you."

Kaeya looks up at him with a wide, hopeful eye. He nods fervently.

"Alright!" Diluc throws a fist in the air. "Okay, so I write, then you copy me."

He takes the paper and starts slowly writing a big letter 'K', which Kaeya seemed to mistake with an 'X' before.

"So, what you have to do here is..."

End.





Utopia

Rui

Kaeya tosses his rucksack across the table and slumps onto a wooden chair. If only these damn things were more comfortable; he could really use a cushioned seat to put up his weary feet.

To be fair, this place has never prioritized comfort, even prior to the change in ownership. Angel's Share provided its patrons with a different kind of comfort; one grew to forget the hard wood numbing their ass as they slurred songs, arms linked with familiar strangers. Now, even the staff feels excessively rigid; makes one wonder what Charles is up to these days, but Kaeya digresses.

Archons, liven this drab place up already. Instead of being visually stimulating, the vines crawling to the upper floor seem to vie for unattainable sunlight. Flowers should soothe the mind, yet they cramp the room and make it an smidge too stuffy. It's all so...banal, if Kaeya had to describe it. Like someone looked up 'tavern' in a dictionary and used the answer verbatim as a blueprint. Where had the inherent charm of Angel's Share gone? Ah, but that name is obsolete now, isn't it?

Kaeya didn't bother to read the sign before entering; drink now, think later. Blame it on the fatigue caused by a harsh journey.

As if on cue, a waiter nervously places a pint down in front of Kaeya.

Perfect timing. "Hey, I don't bite. Unless you want me to," he jokes, resting his head in his hands. Teasing this kid might be the only lighthearted entertainment he's had in eons. 'Kid' is slightly extreme; they're probably around the same age, but Kaeya feels incredibly worn out. Too mature, and fundamentally disconnected from his peers.

"I'll see you around then, dear," he hums, chuckling as the rookie stammers a response.

It's always been this way. Those who don't know Kaeya are caught between feeling intimidated and deeply enthralled. 'Innate charisma', he claims. Though, nothing is innate about Kaeya. He truly is a hardworking, proficient storyteller. Or liar, whichever you prefer.

He's back to bouncing his leg and tapping on the side of his pint mechanically. He doesn't know what he's waiting for, he's plainly on edge. Normally, he dives straight in for the kill and makes this the first of many, until he is so awfully hammered his loneliness becomes a blur. Until nothing matters but to have a jolly good time. How sweet that would be, if life was just one giddy drunken evening.

Sigh. He might as well. He did order the damn thing.

Kaeya frowns the second he forces down a gulp. To call it vile is an exaggeration—at worst, it's insipid—but having expected some kick out of this,

he has a right to be underwhelmed. A drink at Angel's Share, when not designed to absolutely destroy you after one glass, would be top-notch quality. This pales in comparison.

Truth be told, he's aware he's being needlessly harsh. The subpar service doesn't genuinely irk him either; he's pissed because what that once stood here can never be again. And it's partially his fault. Scratch that: it's wholly his fault. By virtue of his Ragnvindr past, he might have taken over, before his ties to his— to *that* family whittled away.

He downs another drink, or maybe five, he's not sure. All he knows is he feels buzzed and glad to finally be getting somewhere, yet he's never wanted to tear out his own eyes in a tavern this much before. There's an amorphous ick bubbling within — like when one starts feeling nauseated, but is stuck being unable to get it over.

This tastes like shit. Which, albeit, Kaeya figured six drinks ago. Won't stop him from thinking it. It tastes like shit, and he feels like shit. Crudely, he wipes his chin on the back of his sleeve and smacks down a tip.

On his way out, he winks to his waiter — though he might not be able to tell, with the eyepatch. As he prepares to take his leave, he catches faint whispers. “Who was that?”

Someone hums. “Who knows. Prob'ly not from 'round here. No one who's

even a lil' bit liked is left ta sit alone.”

The door shuts and rain begins pouring.

Kaeya drags his weight through the city streets, having never been more interested in the pavement. He keeps his gaze low, though his morale is still lower.

His legs have a mind of their own: ere long, he reaches his destination. The cathedral stands proud as ever, and somehow that finally gets him to crack a smile, the first of his despaired travels. Some things truly *do* endure. That's comforting, isn't it?

He slithers past heavy doors, dripping loudly against the pristine paved tiles. Ah, same as ever. Unnaturally clean, with light refracting through the stained glass panels into a kaleidoscope of coloured spots.

For a split second, he considers seeking sanctuary here. The Church would never turn down a unfortunate soul, and Rosaria would never turn down a comrade. Alas, he deserves to stomach all consequences; it's too easy to ruin everything and start anew scott-free.

How he wishes he wasn't quasi-immune to alcohol; this whole *affair* would be run smoother if he was less cognisant.

A girl perks up hearing him approach, her face lighting with a smile. Why, after all these years...! Admittedly, the circumstances are far from ideal, but a reunion is a wonderful occasion nonetheless!

“Sir Kaeya—” Barbara is stopped dead in her tracks by a firm hand on her shoulder. Shaking her head, Rosaria’s expression hardens, her lips pulled in a thin line.

“Don’t. It doesn’t matter how good your intentions are.” She watches the wistful stranger that once was her flamboyant drinking buddy. “Take my word for it: people like that can’t be reached. At best, he needs time,” she sighs, mumbling to herself, “but best cases rarely happen.”

They stand worlds away from Kaeya’s back as he goes for the back door.

As a child, Kaeya adored visiting the cemetery.

A myriad of stories constituted the palimpsest of Mondstadt’s History, waiting to be unearthed. One might need to dig a bit deeper for some, but each name was ultimately embedded into the overarching narrative. Perhaps that was what he loved most about this community, despite initially being an outsider. This promise of belonging and of one’s existence making some minimal difference.

Presently, however, this place cruelly reminds him that some tales are

destined to fade, when their one qualified storyteller runs away with them.

A new stone stands next to their—to Diluc’s Father’s.

Diluc Ragnvindr. A Hero, a Son and a Brother to Many. May you fly swiftly to Celestia.

A Brother to Many, huh...

Kaeya shakes his head, trying to drive out unpleasant thoughts.



At least Diluc is celebrated even in death; Kaeya finds some modicum of relief in that. Diluc deserved the world and more. No one is currently paying respects, but from the looks of it, many have been: the stone is drowned in bouquets and miscellaneous trinkets. Though, half of these are beginning to

show signs of decay – there will come a time, all too soon, where the name Diluc Ragnvindr dies out on all lips.

Maybe Kaeya's, too.

“You always were the favorite child,” he teases, producing a wine bottle from his bag. His throat is dry; his voice, strained. “I brought you a little something. Relax, it's non-alcoholic. Grape juice, your favorite. Anything for my older brother.” Just what is he hoping to achieve with this charade? Can't even take this seriously.

Kaeya pours Diluc a cup and places it on the stone. Call it sacrilegious, but even the dead ought to get a little parched sometimes.

“I take my eyes off of you for five minutes and you go on and die while my back is turned. Always up to no good,” he playfully admonishes, though his heart is not in it.

“Do you remember when I broke Fa—Master Crepus's favorite vase? I cried so hard, and you told me that ‘if you break something, you fix it’. Though, in the end we still got an earful, haha.”

Kaeya steps forward, giving the cold stone a firm pat like he would a horse's flank. Efficient and straightforward; a bit awkward, too. He was never very good at this ‘opening up’ stuff.

“You really ought to practice what you preach. Can't leave this broken as is,” he grunts, sitting down to lean against the stone. Throwing his head back mechanically, he stares into the distance with a bitter smile. “I'm always just a bit too late, aren't I? On that day, and today too. It's like I never learn. You know— Just because your slow younger brother here never manages to catch up to you, didn't mean you had to up and go somewhere I can't reach, ‘Luc.’”

There's no answer. Of course there's no answer. He's not stupid enough to hope for an answer. Yet it would still be nice to get one.

“It's too easy to say that I would do things differently if I could, so I don't. Regrets are for sore losers.” Besides, then his life would mostly amount to a series of regrets, minus the occasional joy along the way.

“You know, traveling made me realize there's no place for me. Isn't that amusing? Of all the regions I visited, you'd think one would work out. I know you'd say ‘not my problem’ or ‘then just come back’. But you know me. I like to complain a lot,” Kaeya jokes, taking a swig from the bottle. “I wish you'd come along. Maybe instead of finding out home away from home doesn't exist, we could've bridged our differences. That would've been a much better conclusion, wouldn't it? Much nicer. Like the ones in the books Adeline used to read us.”

Kaeya plucks the cecilia adorning his hair. Now that he's started talking,

it's like he can't stop. All the feelings wreaking havoc within are breaking out into the open to be judged. By who? Those gods who never favored him?

"When I got here, I really wanted to avoid everyone. I tried, I really did," he laughs, as if amused. Him? The most extroverted of extroverts, avoiding others? Ridiculous! "Couldn't avoid Bennett jumping onto me the second he saw me however. Kids don't have the decency to leave you alone, I suppose, haha." Out of 'respect', everyone let him don the mask of a perfect stranger. His little apprentice had not followed suit, thrilled by his mentor's return. So full of awe and ignorant of what a vile human being Kaeya was. Would he still hug him like that, if he learned how low his hero had fallen?

"I hope he never grows up. That does no one good." He pauses. He should not ask. But it hurts to wonder. "We were happy, were we not? When we were two together."

He pauses, the words heavy on his tongue.

"...When I was your brother?" he corrects.

Enough. There's a ringing in his ears, and again he'll blame the alcohol.

Time to pay tribute to the dead and leave before he becomes one of them any further. He already has one foot in the grave, maybe another would be one too many. Carefully, he buries the cecilia deeper, protected by variegated flowers.

"Thank you for giving me a place to call home, even if it couldn't last in the end. And goodbye, Diluc."

Ring.

"We're closing soon," the barkeep calls, forcefully wiping the counter with a rug. Since there are no footsteps growing distant, he looks up. "To whom do I owe the pleasure?"

Something about this stranger makes it impossible to look away. His eyes.

One is a deep blue, and the other a rich gold. That's not unusual enough to surprise him, it's more about the look they hold. Despite the genteel smile, the stranger seems lost, like he's headed somewhere but isn't confident about it. Not a place worth settling down in, though.

A place to disappear.

"I'm but a nameless traveler," [] replies.

End.





Intertwined Fate

syzygy

It makes sense that Venti favors Angel's Share over The Cat's Tail. The fact of his cat allergy aside, a number of elements makes Dawn Winery's brick and mortar operations appealing, even without designated table space for card games: the history, the reputation, the selection of drink, the sparkling conversational wit of a certain eye-patched regular... even the management's staunch and seasonal resistance to offering bar food is its own kind of charming, if only because it's so predictable.

Kaeya flourishes the hand not swirling his wine.

"But it's a good idea, no?" He casts a smile at Venti. "Even the Darknight Hero has to break for lunch. And, while a crisp apple from Quinn on your way to the bar is its own delight... Heh. Avid tavern-goers generally prefer their fruit fermented."

Venti raises his glass. "An apple a day, they say, keeps the Eye of the Storm at bay."

Kaeya's mouth twists into a wry smile. They toast with a quiet *clink*.

"Scorned jewels of innovation aside," he goes on, "I'm inclined to believe in the weight of a name. The share of angels: that of an aging drink which

evaporates over time. Never mind the question of what an angel even is to Barbatos' children— honoring the spirits' keep with every glass is far more romantic than indulging the increasingly eccentric concoctions of a certain bartender that is, in my humble and unsolicited opinion, just a bit too young to be in the wine industry. Although... given her ambition to destroy it one drink and one drunk at a time, I can't say that I'm not rooting for her." He laughs, trusting that Diluc and Crepus Ragnvindr's legacies will survive his ramblings of petty treachery.

"I do wonder what tales are told at the Tail, tall and otherwise," Venti hums. "A conversation overheard is a conversation of coded word."

The twinkle in Kaeya's eye matches that of the star shining upon the back of his hand. "Of course. *In vino veritas*, and what have you."

The star sharpens. In wine, there is truth.

"Ah?" Barbatos tilts his head at the young Alberich. For a private moment, his gaze is mournful— all too quickly had this child grown. "*In aqua sanitas*."

The wind howls. In water, there is good sense.

It's only a flicker of sympathy, but it *feels* like pity. Pride makes Kaeya wish that he failed to perceive that silent shift in his drinking companion, but wisdom reminds him that the desire to alter the past is a timeless folly of man. It is the reason why history repeats, the very force behind the incremental nudges that

turn a straight line into...

Kaeya draws a well-manicured finger around the rim of his glass.

Circles, circles, circles.

He pauses; he considers Venti. Then he resumes, now circling back in the other direction. “Truth in wine, sense in water... Hmph. When taken only at face value, the phrase lacks—as tasteful sommeliers such as ourselves might say—body. One drunk mind may speak a sober heart, but what of hearts harboring falsehoods as their truths?”



“Ahh... A glass of wine makes not their logic sound, for where sense is lost, truth is not found.”

Kaeya snaps a measured one, two, three times.

Venti taps his chin. “I say, this subjectivity extends to the kind of wine and the source of water! Cider Lake produces the finest of its namesake across Teyvat, and Dandelion Wine does have a way of loosening lips.”

“Oh? For secrets or for songs?”

Venti smiles. “If your drink aches for a melody, dear friend, allow me to arrest your malady.”

If it were that simple, Kaeya wants to believe that Barbatos would have set him free long, long ago.

Venti slides from his seat and his lyre materializes in his hands. Each string he plucks rings clear throughout the tavern; the song he begins is not commanding of attention, but inviting to all ears interested.

“Dandelion, dandelion—dandelion of mine,” he begins, picking singular strings and speaking plainly still, “dandelion, dandelion, messenger across time...”

As the tune carries, Kaeya closes his eyes to a memory of a summer storm.

Kaeya walks the vineyard with an Anemo Crystalfly perched upon one of his fingers. Though grey clouds conceal the blue sky beyond, the Crystalfly is undeterred by the humid air. “How do grapevines know when they’re supposed to grow fruit instead of leaves?”

Warm and quizzical, Diluc smiles. “Well, what do you mean by ‘know’?”

“Mmm...” Kaeya raises his hand and spins it in the air. The motion causes the elemental creature to flutter its wings, but it doesn’t yet take flight. “How about this: what’s the difference between tree roots and tree branches?”

Diluc turns his gaze to the trees on the skirts of the vineyard. “Roots take in water and nutrients from the earth. Branches grow leaves that harness the sun.”

“Right, but it’s all tree. So why don’t roots grow leaves? And why don’t branches draw water?”

“Oh.” A beat. “Okay. How does a dandelion flower ‘know’ when to become a puff?”

Kaeya, understood. Diluc, understanding.

The young man in blue walks ahead, turns to face the young man in red, and begins to walk backwards with his hands raised to either side of him. He trusts that, should anything appear at his back, Diluc will warn him. Kaeya holds

himself to the same. “The sisters would say that Barbatos guides them with the wind, which—to me—is all sorts of counterintuitive.”

“That’s... sensible. A god telling a flower how and when to grow hardly sounds like freedom.”

Kaeya snorts. “For the god or the flower?”

“Yes.”

“Hahaha!”

From the balcony above the manor’s entrance, Crepus smiles gently at the two young men he so proudly calls his sons.

And for as long as either of them could recall, he did so as often as he could. In conversation, whether with business partners from Liyue or Tunner and Adelinde and the rest of the staff at the winery, Crepus always found an opportunity to mention his sons.

In his youth, this made Kaeya uneasy. Though he was exceptionally careful to never let on, Diluc knew that Kaeya grew up fostering doubt over the love that Crepus Ragnvindr and the Dawn Winery family so readily, so freely shared with him. At a low, Diluc had scorned Kaeya as traitorous. And at his lowest... he thought Kaeya to be ungrateful. But with his sojourn, Kaeya continued to

offer Diluc his support in written form, and as they grew into a world that revealed itself to be more incomprehensibly expansive than the pair ever dreamed while in the primes of their youth...

“Dandelion, dandelion. To missing kin, deliver my voice. Dandelion, dandelion, bring not mine mind, sweet Mond, old sorrows. With choices today we weave tomorrow.”

Gloved thumbs swipe the lip of a glass.

Immersed in his thoughts, Kaeya rubs at the lipstick print that matches the deep red of the wine he's nursing. Lumine does the same with a cloudy smudge of peppermint balm— something Sucrose developed for the chapped lips of Dragonspine adventurers.

When she releases it, Diluc brings the glass towards himself, then uses two fingers to support the neck of the bottle as he holds it from the base. After steadily pouring a second serving, he twists the bottle and raises it from her glass— not a drop spilled. She'd been staring into the fractals of the crystal goblet as they caught the light before being filled, though his finishing technique causes her to raise and refocus her stare.

Back during the Bartender Academy Week that Angel's Share hosted, Diluc shared a breath of insight to his relationship with his late father. Did Crepus teach Diluc how to pour wine? Or, as with Diluc's first time mixing drinks...

were there no requirements, no instruction? Even more broadly speaking, did that moment— the inception of the Gray Valley Sunset— speak to the way Diluc was raised? And Diluc considered, what of Kaeya?

“Thank you,” Lumine says, “though after this Dandelion Wine, I think I'd like a different house specialty.”

Diluc opts for an expectant gaze over a verbal prompt.

“A Gray Valley Sunset, of course.” Then, in the exact same cadence and inflection that he first said the words with: “I'll leave the size up to you.”

He's vaguely amused. And vaguely afraid. The Bartending Academy was... some time ago now. If she remembered that, there's no doubt that she's held onto the story he shared. “Impressive memory.”

Lumine shrugs. “There's so much that I can't remember, so I hold onto what I can. For example... I have something of a confession to make.”

“Sister Rosaria is likely to make an appearance later in the evening.”

She bursts with a laugh. “It's... not a confession for the ears of Ordo Favonius. Not like that, at least.”

Diluc scans the bar to find that all faces are familiar. It's both a comfort and a slight disappointment. Nimrod, Draff, Jack, Quinn, Bruce, Cyrus... Is it mere coincidence that Venti and Kaeya are nowhere to be found, but the Traveler—

without Paimon, no less—is? With how rarely Diluc works the bar, the pair has a history of staying past closing and chatting through the night about all manner of things, goading him for his input while he goes about closing duties. The colorful plumage of his favorite patrons is its own kind of humorous: the Anemo Archon in disguise, his estranged brother, and an unknowable Outlander walk into his bar...

He doesn't entertain the thought further. Present again, Diluc responds to Lumine with a word of caution: “‘Off duty’ doesn’t mean ‘not listening.’” The noise he makes is not derisive, but... resigned. “And being a sensible drinker isn’t exactly a prerequisite for being a knight.”

Undeterred, but certainly appreciative of Diluc’s ceaseless vigilance, Lumine nods once. “When Dvalin was under the Abyss Order’s influence, and when the Knights set out to suppress his power by cutting him off from three of the Four Temples, I overheard your conversation with Kaeya.”

He thinks back to those distant events—and for someone more inclined to look to a new dawn than mourn a dusk past, it’s quite the change of pace. Still, pleasant memories of fighting alongside the Traveler and various triumphs make reminiscing worth it. Mondstadt evaded the Fatui’s clutches once more, the Abyss Order’s plot was foiled, and the storms that Dvalin had stirred across the region didn’t entirely ravage their crop. Only time will tell, though, if the wine

aged from wind-whipped grapes will taste any different.

Well—time and *Kaeya*, since Diluc holds no vested interest in evaluating their flavor himself.

He exhales shortly, then, following Lumine’s admission to eavesdropping in the Temple of the Wolf. It’s an amused sound, unlike the slightly tired breath about the alcohol consumption and tipsy conduct of the average knight. “Somehow, that doesn’t come as a surprise.”

“Knights of Favonius,” she quotes, dropping her voice and frowning in full commitment to the impression, “always so inefficient.”

She repeats it in jest, but if Ordo Favonius only took their responsibilities a little more seriously...

Diluc lowers his gaze. If only he’d been stronger. And if not stronger, braver.

Kaeya draws his brow. If only he’d been faster. And if not faster, wiser.

Diluc makes a tight fist and begins wiping down the spotless counter.

At Windrise, Venti sings: “*Dandelion, dandelion. What knowledge holds when siblings diverge? Light and dark, dusk and dawn... Helios and Selene,*

weep not at Hyperion's Dirge."

Crepus beams, either of his hands clasping Diluc's shoulders. "My son, the youngest Cavalry Captain in the history of Ordo Favonius... and the brightest Vision this land has seen in lifetimes."

What use is a title and a Vision without the heart to do good with them?

He turns to Kaeya.

"...and my son, the mind that reformed the system of the quartermaster to be twice as efficient in a single breath. Grandmaster Varka's finest prodigy in all things tactics and strategy."

Crepus' hands upon his shoulders is a weight and warmth he won't soon forget, but Kaeya can only imagine how much heavier their ghosts feel to Diluc.

In Aether's opinion, new to the evening scene as he is, the pensive expression Kaeya wears is a face more fit for the Cavalry Captain's office at HQ than a place of rest like Angel's Share. Yet it's also all so very Kaeya for Kaeya to blur the lines between business and leisure.

Though his song holds, Venti himself is indeed gone from the tavern. In his

place, there is the newest Traveler of this world, making himself comfortable upon a barstool.

"So is this what a Cavalry Captain does with no cavalry to captain?"

Kaeya smirks through the ache in his chest. It's how Aether is most likely to expect him to respond.

"Why, it certainly is," he says, tossing his head. The motion is a diversion from two hard blinks. "I, Cavalry Captain and Quartermaster Kaeya of Ordo Favonius, routinely leave my work for the other knights to handle. I supervise them from afar while seated in this very tavern, a glass of wine in my hand and not a cloud in mind."

Aether appears to roll his eyes at his facetious grandeur, but Kaeya can tell that the arc of amber irises is the Traveler's own cover for what he'd rather not talk about. Clearly, he meant to exchange glances with Paimon, only to remember that she hadn't accompanied him into the tavern. Though reasons for this remain undisclosed, Kaeya can hazard a range of guesses.

"Wow, Captain. I didn't know you were such a—"

Aether grins. Despite the weight on his mind, Kaeya finds himself smiling back as Aether leverages a dramatic pause.

(Is that fair? This joy he feels in Aether's company, no less in Diluc's

tavern—is it allowed? Physically present he may not be, the ghosts that walk Mondstadt in Kaeya's wake make him wonder: is it appropriate to stop preparing for the inevitable break of dawn that waits on the other side of the Traveler's journey through Teyvat to enjoy the present moment? This calm before the storm... Does he *deserve* to savor it?)

“...” Aether bites his lip.

“...” Kaeya raises an eyebrow. Now, perhaps?

“...” Aether stifles a laugh. No, not quite yet.

“...”

“—slacker!”

Kaeya supposes that the rest of the world—and that ancient plot—can wait for its day. This evening is his.

Lumine traces the grain of the wooden counter. How old was the tree that it was fashioned from? What became of the rest of the wood? How many people have put their elbows upon it? She imagines a Diluc that is barely tall enough to see what Crepus is doing behind the counter. She thinks of Kaeya not raising himself to his toes and straining to peer over the wood like Diluc, but nudging Diluc before scaling a stool and leaning forward, palms pressed to the same

counter she sits at, as he watches Crepus make them fruit punch. Maybe Diluc, when he was first invited to bartend, was compelled by a memory that he couldn't remember—

He places a cup in front of her. She blinks at her reflection. Then at Diluc.

“I didn't stick around that much longer, and though I didn't see you, I recognized your voice when Venti introduced us later.”

“Ah. The moment I allowed a wanted criminal to take refuge in my tavern.”

“I was not a wanted criminal. I didn't even touch the Holy Lyre Der Himmel.”

Diluc raises an eyebrow. “Does failure weigh greater than intention?”

“...I'm not a wanted criminal anymore.”

“Of course.”

“C'mon. Save the grilling for the Fatui, persona non grata.” Lumine flicks a finger at him, sending a whisper of Anemo into his face. His bangs are lightly ruffled and she smiles, pleased with herself, at the way he wrinkles his nose. “Speaking of, how many more counterfeit Barbatos' Breaths have you acquired since?”

Her eye for detail reminds him of Kaeya. “Some odd fifty-six fakes.”

“Any closer to the reason why the Fatui are going through so much trouble to find it?”

He shakes his head. “I may not know their specific intentions, but even the best kept secret won’t protect the wicked from retribution.”

The light seeping from Kaeya’s chest, so much softer than Diluc’s ardent flames, coalesces. Condenses.

As it comes into being, his Vision casts glacial blue across his face. He looks to Diluc, even in this moment of shock, of fear, of loss, of words and strikes that can never be taken back, of choices seared into his eye...

Diluc’s lips part slightly.

Was this always meant to be? Could it have gone any other way?

...Is there anything to be gained, anything at all, from even wondering?

The sky weeps, and weeps, and weeps.

The soft patter of rain crescendos. Like a thousand clocks keeping order across timeless realms, Kaeya once put it.

In his youth, Diluc wondered if Kaeya was describing the sound of water pelting or the sound that the rain drowned out.

He can’t recall when he stopped asking Kaeya questions.

“...Rain,” Lumine says. “If only it could cleanse the corrupt souls of this world.”

If that were so, Diluc would bare himself beneath every downpour... just to be certain. Just to be safe.

“Hero Helios, Savior Selene — what, though, of Eos? Herald of dawn, escort above. Dandelion, dandelion, remember, remember. Forget neither kith or kin’s love.”

The chatter in the tavern is full of pleasantries about Diluc’s bartending. When Kaeya arrives, he’s in attire more suited for a gala than for a night on the town. But Diluc understands—there’s more to celebrate now than there was at the party-turned-meeting with Seneschal Pegg, Master Krupp, and Il Dottore. The Fatui may not have been driven from Mondstadt altogether, but what happened to Anthony will never happen again. Though they could do nothing for him, at least Collei will live.

His mask, rejected. Delusion, relinquished.

It's not peace, but so long as Il Dottore is an active threat and continuing to experiment on children as his sick means to an end as one of the Eleven, the quiet is enough peace for now.

"I see it's even more lively today," Kaeya says, a pristine white shoe clicking over the floorboards. Kaeya puts one hand on his hip. "Defeated by the Blackfire Incident criminal, leading to his prison break, failed to recapture..." Thought I'll come by and have a drink. Didn't expect to see you."

Diluc pours him a glass.

"No need for grape juice." Kaeya raises either of his hands. "Came to drop off a present then leave."

Diluc slides the glass across the counter. Kaeya waves a hand to a vase beside the door.

"Here you go," he presents, then hauls it onto the counter. "It's the vase I promised you the other day."

Diluc's weary expression is all Kaeya needs to see to know how much his taste is appreciated.

He laughs, and... since Diluc went through the trouble, Kaeya sits at the bar.

"Don't be so quick to dismiss it, Master Diluc. It broke because of me—"

Diluc raises an eyebrow. That's false.

"—so it's only appropriate that I compensate for it."

"I said I didn't need one, Sir Kaeya."

Diluc turns away from the vase. Kaeya raises his drink to his lips.

Despite the plain, straight-edged cup, the fine scent that meets his nose is far more than fruit juice...

...and within the 'ignored' vase, a Vision burns.

When the Fatui return to Mondstadt, and when Il Dottore surfaces once more, they'll be ready.

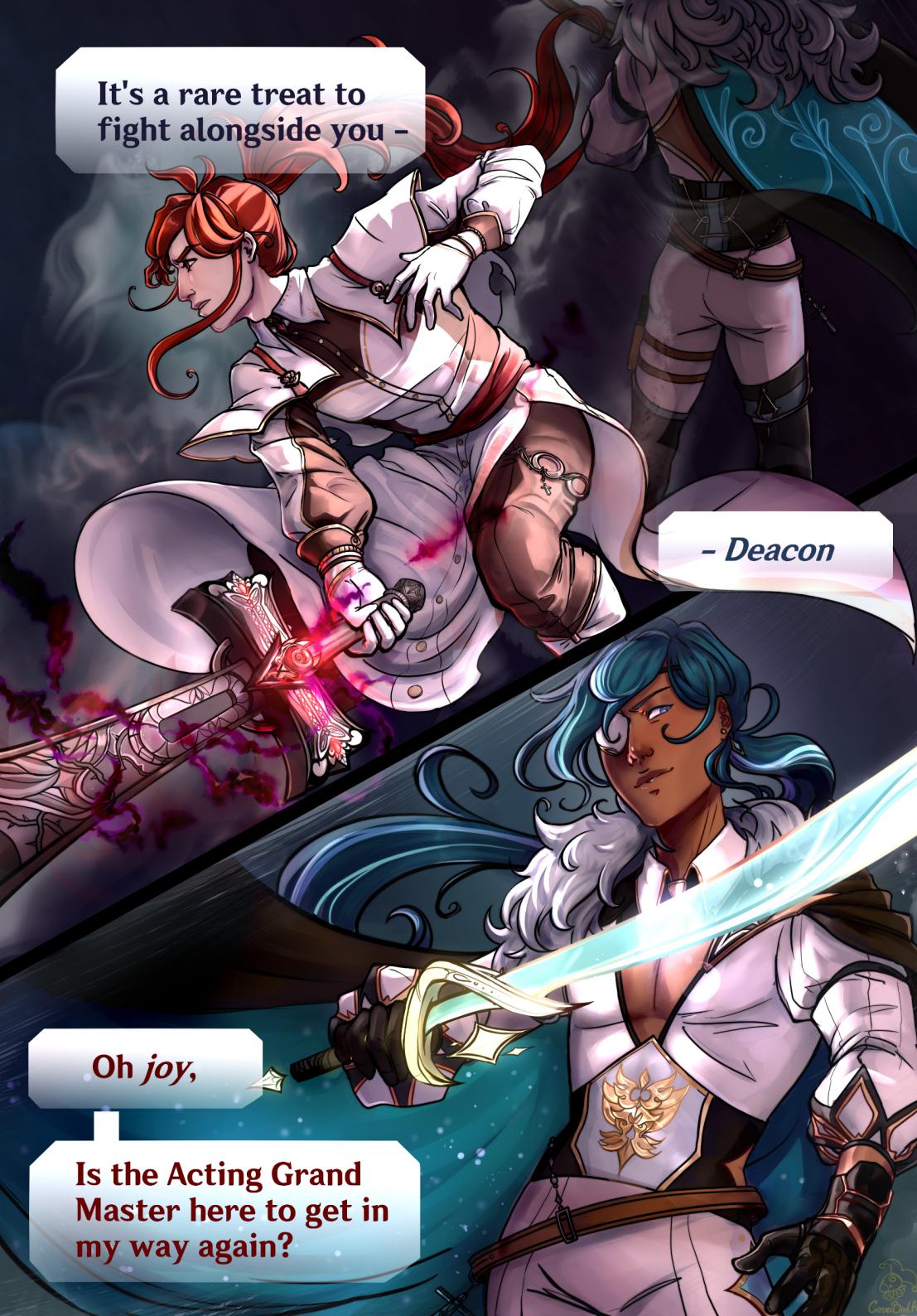
And they'll have each other.

End.



Run Back (Through Time)

Vann



“I’m sorry! Kaey- Oh fuck. Ah, no no no-” Diluc’s hands are shaking as they grab his face. They’re warm when they touch his jaw, then slide down his neck. Those are the only parts of his head that can feel his brother’s calloused touch. The rest is flames.

Diluc’s fingers are slick with his blood as he gathers him up in his arms, his movements frantic, desperate. Kaeya’s forehead hits his brother’s shoulder. Everything smells of copper and ash. With his other eye he can see Diluc’s torn clothes soak up his blood, turning as red as his hair. The rainfall hits his back, puts out the little fires that surround him.

Out of everything, this makes him pause. It’s been raining all afternoon, yet his brother’s attacks were strong enough to spark flames on the humid forest.

He can feel his fingers starting to freeze on the deathgrip he has on the vision.

“-s not your fault,” Kaeya mumbles into Diluc’s shoulder.

If he hadn’t used the vision, Diluc wouldn’t have switched to pyro. It was a reflex, automatic. Although the shield barely held. He’s not all that sure how his skull didn’t crack under the blow. His eye on the other hand.

“C-can you get up? Kaeya, oh archo- c’mon c’mon.” Diluc’s breath comes more ragged than before. He trembles against him. Kaeya manages to look at him through the blood, the rain and the steam. He’s never seen him more afraid, not even earlier today. Diluc brings his hand up to his face, flinching as he carefully brushes away his soaked hair from his skin. He puts his palm against his eye. The pain is so blinding Kaeya can’t help but scream.

Dliuc draws his hand away violently, “Kaeya, get up get up get up.” He backs away from him enough to grab hold of his arms. With his considerable strength, he hauls him up, taking one of his wrists and wrapping it around his shoulders, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Keaya please look at me- I’m s-”

The world tilts, his legs won’t listen to him. He’s still listening to Diluc’s stuttered apologies as everything else freezes over.

The breeze is warm to the point of being uncomfortable. Something heavy is settled against his limbs, underneath him it feels like he’s lying on rocks that have been baking under the sun. Everything is blinding white when he opens his eyes. Or tries to.

There’s something over his right eye.

The world feels honey slow around him. He puts it together by pieces. He’s on the concrete-like mattress of the infirmary, covered by a hundred blankets

despite the strong sun coming through the windows. His mouth is dry and his limbs are heavy.

He can hear Mondstat’s usual bustle through the open window, before his mind can go any further he looks out of it. The sky is clear, bright blue with huge clouds that travel with the wind.



On one of the rooftops nearby is a familiar looking falcon; perched on the edge of the building, it seems to catch his gaze before flying away.

Kaeya turns his head towards the rest of the room. The beds are neatly done and there’s a bouquet of calla lilies on his bedside table, next to some bloody gauze and an empty cup of tea. He starts to rip off the covers before he dies of heatstroke and, as he’s fighting with a woolen blanket, the door opens softly.

Both he and Jean pause, struck still.

He can see the way all the tension melts from her body, a second cup of tea clinks against the plate she holds on her hand. “You’re up,” She hurries to his side, then hesitates. “How are you feeling?”

He kicks off the last of the blankets. He’s thankful she’s here, clearly has

been here for a while, but he'd prefer if no one had seen him in this state. Much less Jean.

And Diluc says *he* likes to make a spectacle.

He tries to come up with an answer for something he does not know. "Like I'm lying in a field of flaming flower stamens. Seriously, who wrapped me up in furs during April?"

"They couldn't get your temperature up." Jean sits at the foot of the bed, carefully.

Kaeya looks away from her concerned look. "Well, mission accomplished."

She stretches a hand out and he lets her press it against his arm. Her touch is warm and gentle.

"You're still cold..."

"I promise you, I'm not," Kayea huffs.

Silence settles over them like a dark cloud. He wonders what could possibly be said in a situation like this.

"Do you want me to get a healer?" Jean tries to hand him her cup of tea. Kaeya places it aside.

"I'm fine, just..." Well.

He really, really doesn't want to ask.

Kaeya tries to catch Jean's gaze, trying to find answers there instead of looking for them. But she won't raise her eyes from her hands. He can only guess she's also afraid of questioning him. He watches her feelings conflict on her features, but finally she looks at him.

"He's gone," she says, knowing what Kaeya wants to know more than anything.

Kaeya frowns, it hurts to do so.

"What? Gone where?" His voice sounds strangely detached from himself.

"I don't know," Jean sighs. "He didn't explain."

"How long have I been out?" He tries to slide his legs off the bed, but Jean puts a hand firmly against his chest.

"Let a healer look at you first." With that she stands and walks out of the room, swift as the breeze. Leaving him alone again.

Jean keeps looking at him like he holds the answers she needs, which he does not.

Over the course of the evening, he comes to learn Jean's perspective of the

facts. Diluc did not say a word when he left him bleeding out at her dormitory doorstep, and she hasn't seen him since.

Kaeya lets her believe they were attacked, and he's tempted to believe her version of events. She reasons Diluc left him with her since he no longer trusts the knights; that makes sense. Everything else, however. Jean leaves him alone when she notices Kaeya's difficulty at keeping his eye open, but as soon as she's gone, so is his fatigue.

Why didn't he tell her? Why didn't Diluc tell all of them?

His head hurts from trying to figure out his brother's reasons, or more importantly, his whereabouts. There's something Jean is not telling him.

His right hand is still weak and his legs still tremble when he so much as pulls the covers up, but he can't keep lying in the dark. After the nurses leave his dinner on the bedside table, Kaeya stumbles out of bed and consequently falls out of the building's window. As he lands gracelessly on a bush, he feels some of his stitches rip open.

The walk to the state isn't long, but it's difficult. Especially when he's trying his hardest to stop himself from limping or catching anyone's attention. The worst of it all is that when he gets there, all that awaits him are more questions.

He feels dizzy, unstable. He leans against the stone walls of the mansion until one of the workers moving crates around comes to passive aggressively

ask him if he needs anything.

Kaeya laughs dryly, he feels himself smiling. The worker frowns at him before taking a step back.

"Yeah," he says, straightening up with a hand against the wall. "I could use your help." At his side, the vision pulses. It catches the man's eye and his face turns pale.

"Kaeya!" Jean calls somewhere behind him. He turns around sharply. The man takes the opportunity to leave.

"You're bleeding again," Jean says softly when she catches up with him. "What are you doing?"

"What is this?" He asks back, his voice high strung and desperate. "What happened to-"

Jean looks at him, dumbstruck. "You- you don't know?"

"Don't know what?" Kaeya demands.

"Diluc sold the manor," she explains, blinking at him. "You didn't-? I thought you two would have... discussed it."

"He- What the fuck?" He slumps back against the building once again.

"We should head back to the infirmary," Jean suggests, her tone shifting

to hide her confusion.

Kaeya could not be more grateful that she does not press him further. She offers her arm and he takes it without thinking. They walk back slowly.

“The winery... did he?” He dares to inquire.



“Ah, not from what I last heard. I think he asked Adelinde to look after it,” Jean explains, watching closely for his reaction.

Kaeya does not let her see anything he’s feeling. So Diluc is truly, completely gone.

“Right,” he replies. It’s the last word he utters for the rest of the way back.

Jean leaves him in the same infirmary bed, alone. She hesitates on the doorway, but something in Kaeya’s eye must give him away, because she sighs and closes the door gently. Before it shuts she says.

“If you need anything, I’ll be back in the morning. I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he lies.

“The healer said you only need to rest for a couple more days.” A bit of her elder sister tone creeps in. It’s like salt on the wound. “It will probably be faster if you stay in bed.”

“It’s not like I have anywhere else to go,” Kaeya says before he can stop it.

Jean’s shoulders fall. “If you don’t wanna stay at the Winery or the Knight’s quarters, you can always-”

“I’m sorry,” he interrupts, unwilling to correct her about the Winery. “Sorry, don’t worry. It’s just been a long day.”

“Get some rest,” she says quietly before she leaves.

Of course, Kaeya can’t. His mind goes through a thousand questions until his head starts hurting. Ridiculously, the second thing he’s the most hung up on is where all his belongings ended up.

The moon is high and shining through the window as he begins to take stock. The healer said his ribs have mostly returned back to their place and his shinbone has nearly pieced itself back together. She didn’t need to tell him anything about his eye, he’s seen Diluc’s training burns enough times to know that it’s not gonna get any better. He’s lucky it’s not much worse.

He does not question what he decides to do.

Mondstat is dark and mostly silent as he limps his way down the well worn

dirt path. The air is cold and sleep heavy, although it seems to pick when he looks back towards the city.

The windmills and the city walls catch the moon light, and no matter how much he tries to avoid it, Kaeya's mind still flies back to that first night. His father's hand in his, half helping half dragging him along. Mondstat's towers looked so imposing, impossibly tall and dark against the night sky.

Now they seem to be waving him goodbye. As the sails on the mills spin, he turns his back on the city, thinking that if he's sure of anything at this point, is that the wind will keep blowing on them whether he comes back or not.

The thought is unexpectedly comforting.

Kaeya has been doing as he was told.

Watching, listening, without anyone seeing or hearing him. The hou- the manor is not helping. Mondstat's buildings are mostly wood. Creaky, old, loud wood. Nothing like the loyal, discreet stone he's used to.

He sits on the top of the stairs, curled in on himself. This is usual, familiar. He used to listen in on his parents and the rest of the adults just like this. It's dark, he was put to bed a while ago. He does not understand why Diluc has a later bedtime than him. It's not like he does anything with that extra time.

Right now, for example, he's simply sitting by the fireplace. Staring directly at the amber light, not even bothering with a book or anything. While Crepus goes over some documents (that Kaeya has been trying to get at).

Kaeya does not understand his new "brother".

What's half comforting is that the adults around here don't seem to understand him either.

Crepus places the papers on the drawer of a nearby table, and leans back on his chair. Kaeya observes the way he sighs and stretches, then turns his attention to his son. His brows furrow, concerned.

"Diluc," he calls. It's a couple times before the boy snaps back and looks at him.

"Hm?" Diluc replies, slowly turning towards his father.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" This gets Kaeya's attention, he knows a trap when he hears one. Adults are like that.

Apparently, Diluc does, too. His previously relaxed posture becomes tense, artificial. "...No, um."

Crepus sighs once again, the sound makes Diluc flinch. "Your fencing instructor came by this afternoon." Kaeya knows where this is going.

He watched Diluc take off into the city for his lessons earlier, or so it seemed. But Kaeya took the time the staff thinks he uses to take naps to follow after him. Afterall, he won't be getting lessons until he's older, but he can still peek into Diluc's classes and start to listen to the teacher's instructions. Diluc is good with striking, but struggles with his posture. Kaeya can start to learn from the corrections he gets.

Except, Diluc didn't actually go to his lessons earlier, he walked until he thought he was out of view of the manor and took off outside the city. Although the older boy was faster, Kaeya had a hunch of where he was headed.

And sure enough, he found Diluc on the back of the city walls, in the same place where they had ended up after sneaking out during the weekend and found an old and rusty longsword. Diluc was immediately fascinated by it and, unlike Kaeya, he could actually lift it. They had spent all day playing with that before heading back. But they decided to leave it given that Crepus didn't allow weapons in the house after the balcony incident.

"We can hide it so no one else will take it," Kaeya had suggested when he noticed how down Diluc looked at the idea of leaving it behind. They ended up burying it next to a dandelion patch.

That morning Diluc had returned for it, and Keaya watched as he tried to wield it. Tried. The thing was so heavy, and Diluc kept handling it as a fencing sword.

Kaeya truly doesn't understand him. He's good at fencing, and shortswords are faster, more agile and simply easier to fight with, plus Kaeya thinks they look so cool. Not to mention they are the standard weapon for the Knights, which is the only reason Crepus has him in those lessons. But Diluc even told him that he wants to try a claymore, and now he was going back to practice using that beat down longsword.

Kaeya figured Diluc had made it. He arrived back at the manor at the usual time he does when his lessons are over, and he didn't show any signs of running all the way back from outside the city.

From his hiding place, Kaeya can see the way Diluc stays completely still. Caught.

This, he does understand. Even after everything Kaeya wouldn't want to disappoint his father either.

The brief seconds of silence seem unending, and to everyone's surprise, especially his own, Kaeya is the one that breaks it.

"He took me dandelion seed picking," he says, emerging from his spot upstairs and making them turn towards him.

"Kaeya, you're still awake?" Crepus asks.

"I was thirsty," he lies. "And I heard you."

Diluc looks at him strangely. So he continues.

“I knew he would be going to his lessons so I asked him if he could show me again where the dandelions grow on his way there, I’m still scared I’ll get lost,” Kaeya explains.

Crepus looks at Diluc, who nods slowly at first, then with more conviction.

“He didn’t want to leave me alone in case I wouldn’t know the way back. But we lost track of time, I’m sorry.” Kaeya stays behind the stair banister, trying to look a little guilty.

“Well, I’m glad you are looking after Kaeya,” Crepus tells Diluc, who immediately relaxes. “I guess you can make up for the lesson another day.”

“And Kaeya, if you need help with finding your way, you can always ask the staff or Adelinde,” Crepus says.

“I don’t mind doing it,” Diluc interjects before Kaeya can reply.

Crepus smiles softly at him. “That’s alright, then, but be more conscious of your schedule, okay?”

“Okay,” Diluc mutters. Then he gets up. “I think I’ll go to bed, too.”

After they say their goodnights, Kaeya follows Diluc slowly up the stairs. He drags his feet behind him. The decision was far too risky, and definitely not

something he was told to do. It was the complete opposite of his orders. Not only did he reveal himself to be listening in to a private conversation, but now Diluc knows he follows him around. He walks behind him quietly, dreading the questions Diluc will surely have.

Instead, all he gets is a hard pat on the back, like the ones Crepus deals around when he’s happy about something and a heavy “Thank you.” Before Diluc walks into his room.

Until now, Kaeya had never thought of Mondstat as “quiet”

He hates having this much time to himself as he makes his way towards the Liyue border. There’s nothing to do but think while walking, not that he’s walking all that much either way. His body resents every step he takes.

Besides the pain, the slow pace and the complete lack of company, there’s the fact that he can’t even be sure if he’s headed in the right direction. It’s been three days since he snuck out the infirmary, into the winery and out again to look for any sort of lead about where Diluc might have gone. All he found was more questions, and a vision.

He’s headed to Liyue because it’s the closest, and there’s no way his brother Diluc is somewhere in Mondstat.

The route he chose is unfriendly even to travelers who don't have several cracked ribs and a temporary limp, but he couldn't risk Jean sending some knights looking for him with the intention of bringing him back to recover. He doubts she would force him to return, however he'd rather not bother with that risk.

He can probably stop worrying about that, it's not like anyone in their right mind would think he's passing through Dragonspine.

Kaeya tugs a little on the black coat he stole from Diluc's room back at the winery. He was expecting to have a wonderful time dealing with the freezing cold of the mountain mixing with his injuries but the temperature is almost energizing (maybe he's going a little crazy from the blow to the head). However traveling by night is practically impossible, even at the foot of the mountain.

He sets up a rather lousy camp, at least by knight standards, but as long as he doesn't freeze to death in his sleep he can't complain. Lately he's so exhausted, falling asleep is easy, even as a blizzard closes in.

When he wakes up a few hours later, the howling of the wind is gone, and what startles him awake is the sound of snow and ice cracking under heavy footsteps.

Kaeya hesitates as he goes for the scabbard of his sword, it still hurts

when he closes his hand around it. There's faint conversation along the footsteps, getting more distinct as it gets closer.

"-rth time they have called reinforcements to this area, not to mention the extra deployment of skirmishers for the country in general." A pissed off voice says as Kaeya stumbles inside his tent, kicking his bag away.

He moves slowly, careful not to make a sound as he opens the tent slightly. A fatui agent makes his way through the path just below his camp, accompanied by a mage and a numerous group of soldiers not far behind.

"Any updates from our superiors?"

The agent shakes his head and sighs before glancing back towards the troops. "Just bad news from Liyue."

Kaeya climbs out his tent and is smacked hard on the chest by the freezing air. He starts walking parallel to the fatui below him.

"Liyue? But the knights-" the mage says.

"This was never the knights," the agent interrupts. "It's something else."

The pair falls silent. Kaeya crouches behind every rock or clump of ice he can find for cover. He's breathing hard and trying to be silent about it, but the couple moves faster than the pace he can maintain for now.

Thankfully, they stop only a couple of meters ahead, once they arrive at a leveled fatui camp. The pair exchange somber looks (probably, it's hard to tell with the masks) and wait the few minutes it takes for the skirmishers to catch up to them.

"Start piling up the bodies," the mage orders. "Or what's left of them."

Kaeya shivers on his hiding spot as the soldiers begin moving the corpses of their fallen companions. The fatui camp is practically destroyed. Their tent smashed to bits, their weapons bent and broken. However it does not look destroyed enough to be the work of a lawchurl or another monster and, from what he managed to overhear, this isn't the first time it's happened.

He watches the agent nod towards the mage and they step back from the main group. Kaeya swears and bolts towards their direction, staying low.

"How many reports is it gonna take for headquarters to act?" The mage asks.

"This is nothing we can't handle, they've just taken us by surprise," the agent says. "From what I gather, the Liyue camps will be reinforced."

"Seems to me they're just sending more soldiers to get slaughtered," the mage sighs.

"We've just sent word to The Fair Lady," the agent says. "But if the attacks

have moved to Liyue then..."

"Then it won't be our concern any longer." The mage waves her hand, dismissively. "Let's just identify the dead."

They move once again, and this time Kaeya can't follow close enough to hear the rest of the conversation. Besides, now that the whole group is gathered in the camp, it's more likely he'll be spotted. Carefully then quickly, he runs back to his tent, hoping the freshly fallen snow will keep him hidden for the night.

To be continued...





So there I Was....

Wasabii

"How was that for a song? Certainly a fun one..."

Diluc listened to the radio, Kaeya's voice filling the silence that usually came with the middle of the afternoon at Angel's Share.

He cleaned the used glasses from the night prior, not noticing when his father, Crepus, walked into the main area until the radio was clicked off.

"Diluc, have you slept at all since Angel's Share opened last night?" Crepus asked, taking a seat at the bar in front of him.

Diluc shook his head, not finding much point in lying to his father. "No."

Crepus sighed. "When was the last time you had a proper night's sleep?"

He shrugged, carefully stacking the glasses. "Dunno. A few days maybe?"

"Diluc," Diluc pretended he didn't hear him. "Diluc," Crepus said again, more force behind it this time.

"Yes, Father?" Diluc gritted out, finally looking at his father, already knowing what he was going to say.

"You need to rest, Diluc. You're overworking yourself."

Crepus said seriously, a worried look gracing his face.

"I'm fine, Father." He shrugged off his worry.

"You're not, Diluc. Rest. Please," Crepus practically begged.

He sighed, biting his lip. "Fine."

Kaeya hummed along to the pop song that was playing, scrolling through his phone as he waited for the music and commercial break to be over.

He narrowed his eyes as an unknown caller number popped up on his cell phone, but he answered the call regardless. "Hello?"

"Is this Kaeya Alberich?" A female voice said from the other side.

A pit settled in Kaeya's stomach. How did they know him? It wasn't the first time he had gotten unknown numbers to his cell phone, and it was never a pleasant experience. "Yes."

"I regret to inform you that your parents have passed."

Kaeya didn't remember calling Rosaria to take over for him. He didn't remember driving to the mortuary, where the mortician directed him towards

his now-deceased parents.

He didn't remember the funeral.

He didn't remember the day after, driving to his parent's house to retrieve (he couldn't bring himself to say 'sell') their stuff.

But there he was, sitting on the bed in the room his mother and father shared, staring at the closet. It smelled like Calla Lilies, one of his mother's favorite flowers. In fact, a withered vase of them sat on the bedside table next to him.

Kaeya slowly blinked, trying to get his bearings. He blinked again, noticing a harsh edge peeking out of the shadow in the closet.

Curiosity overwhelmed his sadness, forcing him up, towards the closet. Opening the double doors a little bit more, he retrieved what seemed to be a photo album. Kaeya took it back to the bed, sitting criss-cross in the middle of the bed with the album in front of him.

It was a black book, the word "Ragnvindr" written in a white marker in what he recognized as his mother's loopy cursive.

He furrowed his eyebrows, the name making no sense in his mind. His last name was Alberich. Who's name was this?

Opening the book, he was greeted with a picture of a smiling man

holding two babies- one of them clearly Kaeya from his blue hair, wispy on his little infant head. The other baby had red hair, bright like the streak that adorned Kaeya's rattail.

He flipped the page, this time a picture of his mother, smiling with tears running down her cheeks, gently pressing her forehead against Kaeya's.

He flipped again, this time a picture of both him and the other baby in a cradle together. The contrast between them was glaringly obvious, but it was clear that they were siblings.



The pages after that were pictures of Kaeya as he grew up, the latest his graduation photo from college. The two redheads were nowhere to be seen.

Kaeya bit the inside of his cheek, closing the book and staring at the cover.

If the other baby was his sibling, he had to be the same age as him. And the his, he presumed- father, how old would he be? His parents passed early, sure, but maybe (he didn't want to hope) this red-haired man was still alive.

He got off the bed, smoothing out the wrinkles from where he had sat, thoughts running through his head at 100 miles per hour. The other child had to have been the same age as him. Maybe he could find him? How would he go about looking? He supposed he could announce something on his station... He didn't want to go there though. Too vulnerable to people who didn't truly care.

Locking the house door behind him, Kaeya made his way to his car, the photo album in his hand. Opening the car door, he carefully set the photo album down on the passenger seat, irrationally fearing that if he didn't take care of the book, it would disintegrate.

He turned on the car, body on autopilot as he drove back to his apartment. He could approach Rosaria. If there was anything that woman was good at, it was finding things (he couldn't count the amount of times he had her find the anonymous people who chased after him. They never bothered him again once she did.)

Before he knew it, he was back at his apartment, and it was dark out.

"Rosaria?" Kaeya poured himself a drink of something or other from his liquor cabinet, despite it being 10:15 in the morning. She would understand. She lived off of Monster and vodka.

"What?" She answered harshly, but he knew that she wasn't upset. She was naturally harsh, which is mostly what kept her from being harassed like Kaeya was.

"Good morning to you, too, love." Kaeya said nonchalantly.

"How is your ass? You haven't been in for a week. People keep asking about you. Not just the listeners either, Jean says that you're more 'personable'."

Kaeya cringed. There was no judgment in Rosaria's tone, just pure concern (Rosaria would deny it if he asked about it), and it made him guilty. "I've been... living. It's been rough."

Kaeya was often afraid of vulnerability, but it came naturally with Rosaria. He sighed, tracing the rim of his glass, tracing the swirling patterns on it with his eyes. "Wanna talk about it?"

He shrugged even though he knew Rosaria couldn't see it. "I dunno. It's just... surreal, even now. They always seemed immortal, y'know?"

"Most parents seem that way." She responded.

"And now they're gone, so... What do I do now?" Kaeya ran his fingers

through his rattail, combing out the non-existent tangles.

“You keep on living.”

She was right, of course. It wasn’t often Rosaria was wrong, but it hurt him nonetheless.

His fingers snagged on a tangle in his hair. Peering down, he took notice of the bright red streak, one that people always comment on, but he couldn’t imagine himself without. “Do you mind finding someone for me?”

“Someone else assault you?”

“Surprisingly, no. When I was at my parents’ house yesterday, I found this photo album with baby pictures of me and someone else I don’t recognize.”

“You want me to find them.” She interjected.

“Yeah. There’s also a picture of this older man- he has red hair, like mine, but a shade darker.”

“Mhmm... Any names?”

“Not really. ‘Ragnvindr’, but that’s it.”

“Give me a few days, I’ll get back to you about it. But keep in touch, you’re not alone in this.”

Rosaria was a woman of her word, and a few days later, she texted him an address to what appeared to be a bar.

His nerves rattled him as he parked his car in the lot, chewing his lip as he read the address over and over to be sure it was right. It was, the lights in Angel’s Share bright, and the voices audible from outside.

The outside was simple enough, the rectangular door centered between two windows, shutters a deep red color, a contrast to the green of the roof. There was a folding chalkboard sign advertising some half-priced liquor standing outside the bar.

Kaeya stepped out of his car, shutting the door and locking it behind him. He walked up to the door, wincing a little at the noise, but going in regardless.

He weaved his way through the crowded bar towards the counter, where he spotted a shock of bright red hair that he *immediately* knew was the person he was looking for.

Sitting at the bar, he waved down the redhead, taking a deep breath as he approached.

“What’ll you have?” He asked, standing in front of Kaeya.

“Diluc Ragnvindr? The redhead stiffened. “I’m Kaeya Alberich.

Your brother.”

“I’m Kaeya Alberich. Your brother.”

Diluc wasn’t sure what to say to that. What does one say when they suddenly find out that the popular host of Favonius was his sibling? For that matter, what does one say when they just find out that they suddenly have a sibling?

If Diluc had a glass in his hand, he would’ve dropped it. “You’re crazy,” He replied, on the defensive.

Kaeya bit his lip, and Diluc watched as he ran his fingers through his hair, his eyes catching on the bright red streak in his hair, the exact same shade as his. It’s a coincidence, he tried to convince himself.

“Look, I know how it sounds, but I lost my parents not too long ago-” Kaeya started.

“That sucks,” Diluc interrupted, a bit too much bite in his tone.

“-But when I went to their house to... figure out what to do with their possessions, I found this book with your last name on it,” He finished.

Diluc bit his lip. This was crazy. He was crazy. This doesn’t happen in real

life.

But here he was. Kaeya in front of him, a pleading look on his face.

“Charles!” Diluc called, making Kaeya jump.

The other barkeep poked his head from around the corner. “Yes?”

“Watch over the bar for me.” Diluc frowned at Kaeya. “You, come with me.”

Diluc led Kaeya to the back, in front of Crepus’s office door. He knocked, the sound of it quiet compared to the people talking in the background. “Father, we need to talk.”

“Come in,” Crepus answered from inside the office

He opened the door, motioning for Kaeya to follow.

Crepus looked up, opening his mouth to speak before his eyes caught on Kaeya.

Diluc glanced at Kaeya, who had his mouth pressed in a fine line, probably to keep the tears from falling out of his watery eyes. “Kaeya?” Crepus asked quietly, standing from his desk.

Diluc’s eyebrows furrowed. “You know him?”

Crepus didn’t look over at Diluc when he answered, his eyes fixated

on Kaeya. "Of course I remember my child- You weren't the only one I birthed."

Diluc watched as he held Kaeya's face in his hands. "Why didn't I know about him?"

"Me and Kaeya's father arranged it. It was an ugly ordeal, and I didn't want to raise you two separately, but Eydis insisted. I suppose it was the price I paid for giving in to Adelbern."

Crepus hugged Kaeya, and Diluc watched as tears fell out of his eyes, stuck in place before hugging back with a sob. He felt himself tear up, it finally clicking that that was his brother.

Crepus held Kaeya as he sobbed, letting him go and holding his face once more. "Papa..." Kaeya started, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "Papa never hugged me like that."

Crepus let out a small chuckle. "That sounds like your father. He was quiet in his love."

Diluc placed a hand on Kaeya's shoulder to get his attention. When he turned, Diluc wrapped him in a bear hug, Crepus joining in soon after.



Diluc placed a hand on Kaeya's shoulder to get his attention. When he turned, Diluc wrapped him in a bear hug, Crepus joining in soon after.

Kaeya went back on the radio soon after he found the Ragnvindrs. He found himself motivated to exist with his new found family, and he knew that he could keep going with Diluc and Crepus behind him.

"Hello, Caller. What's your song of choice?" Kaeya said in a silky voice that he reserved for Favonius.

"Devil Town by Cavetown?" A voice that he recognized as Diluc asked.

Kaeya let out a laugh, the first one in a long time not shared with Rosaria. "Will do."

Kaeya scrolled through the songs on the media player, quickly finding Devil Town from the D section.

He muted himself, and hummed along to the song.

"... Hold my hand tight, we'll make it another night..."

End.



Heart to Heart

SuguEmbers

“What are you doing?” Diluc asked angrily, annoyed that he had to keep such a close eye on this *boy* that father had insisted was his new little brother. Kaeya flinched and froze, looking back over his shoulder at Diluc. His face was ridden with guilt.

Kaeya blinked slowly and shifted slightly to hide whatever he *had* been doing behind his back, “Nothing,” He said suspiciously.

Diluc narrowed his eyes, “Whatever you’re doing, *stop it*,” He bit, fully aware that anyone this secretive couldn’t be up to anything *good*. He didn’t even know why his father thought bringing home a ratty orphan was a good idea but here they were, nine months down the line, and the boy was still super secretive and overly sensitive.

Speaking of which, Kaeya’s eyes were already tearing up at the few words Diluc had said. He let out a deep sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Stop crying,” He insisted.

Kaeya sniffed and wiped his nose with his sleeve, “I’m not doing anything, ‘Luc,” He blinked and tears fell perfectly down his face, “I *promise*. I’m not up

to anything. I just... it’s a secret,” He murmured and Diluc’s frown deepened. Three years seemed to make a big difference emotionally.

“Stop being an over-sensitive idiot,” Diluc snapped and that just set the kid off even more, “Stop crying! Father will think I’m being mean to you!”

Once again, Kaeya sniffled, “Because you *are* being mean to me!” He whined and Diluc tutted. Kaeya raised to his feet, tears now streaming down his cheeks; Diluc truly didn’t understand *why* Kaeya was so upset.

“Kae, you have to—”



“Leave me alone!” Kaeya interrupted, picking up whatever it was he’d been hiding and running off from the front yard and out of sight.

Diluc sighed and shook his head, turning back to the main building and headed back inside. Kaeya would undoubtedly be back within the next few minutes and then Diluc would apologise and things would be normal again. Kaeya ran off at least once a week. And he always came back within a few minutes.

Always.

Except this time a few minutes passed and Kaeya didn’t come running back.

And then ten minutes passed. Followed by another fifteen. And suddenly Diluc was worried – *actually worried* – about Kaeya. What if he’d gone and gotten himself lost? What if he came up against some slimes, or hilichurls, or god forbid treasure hoarders?

Damnit.

Diluc found himself rushing out of the house before he could even really process it. There were only so many places the kid would disappear to, he just had to check them one by one and he’d find him.

He didn’t even realise he’d started running until he reached the beach. He rushed along the beach as he looked in the nearby caves and behind the rocks,

his heart heavy with worry. He knew that when Kaeya was upset, he often found solace in watching the fish and searching for shells. As he searched, memories flooded his mind, reminding him of the last time they had all been there together.

It had been a few months after Kaeya had joined their family and Diluc recalled how their father had insisted on a family trip to the lake. The late summer afternoon was etched vividly in Diluc’s memory. Adelinde had packed a delightful picnic and they had spent the day enjoying each other’s company.

It was that day, that outing, that something *magical* had happened. For the first time, Kaeya had laughed. It was a beautiful sound, so genuine and pure, and it was that moment that Diluc felt the overwhelming urge to protect Kaeya. To protect this boy that had become his brother by circumstance.

As Diluc continued along the shore, scanning the area for any sign of Kaeya, he realised that his brother was nowhere to be found. He had to find him. Their father would be *furious* if he found out Diluc lost Kaeya.

With a heavy heart, Diluc retraced his steps toward the house, a flicker of hope still burning within him. As he approached the sprawling vineyard, memories of a particular day resurfaced, a day that had brought them closer as brothers.

It had been a sunny afternoon when Diluc had taken it upon himself to teach

Kaeya the art of picking grapes the Ragnvindr way. Although it was a simple and common method, Diluc didn't tell Kaeya that. He had wanted to make it feel special, something unique to their family.

Kaeya had been filled with enthusiasm, eager to learn something new and immerse himself in the traditions of his new family. Diluc had taken great pleasure in watching his brother's eyes sparkle with excitement, mirroring his own passion for Diluc's heritage.

However, the momentary joy had taken an unexpected turn when Kaeya spotted a tiny bug perched on one of the vines. His reaction had been nothing short of comical, as he let out a high-pitched scream and hid behind Diluc's protective figure. Unable to contain himself, Diluc burst into laughter, finding joy in Kaeya's exaggerated response.

Quickly regaining his composure, Diluc had swiftly and delicately moved the bug away from the vines, coming to Kaeya's rescue. In that moment, Kaeya had looked up at him with adoration shining in his eyes and proclaimed Diluc to be a superhero, one who could vanquish even the scariest of creatures. It was a title that Diluc had let inflate his ego, relishing in the delight of being perceived as someone extraordinary in Kaeya's eyes.

As Diluc ventured deeper into the vineyard, his hope began to dwindle. Each row of grapevines that he passed seemed to whisper echoes of emptiness, an absence that weighed heavily on his heart. The vibrant green leaves and

clusters of grapes appeared untouched, devoid of any signs that Kaeya had hidden among them.

Diluc reached the end of the vineyard and still his search yielded no results. Kaeya remained hidden, his whereabouts still a mystery. A deep sigh escaped Diluc's lips, the weight of disappointment settling upon his shoulders. It seemed that the vineyard, once a symbol of their bond, held no answers this time. "Damn it, Kae. Where are you?" He whispered to himself.

Reluctantly, Diluc turned away from the vineyard, the tendrils of worry tightening their grip around his heart. He knew he couldn't give up, that he had to continue his quest to find his brother. Determination etched into his features, he steeled himself for the next leg of his search, ready to explore new paths in the hope of bringing Kaeya back to the warmth and security of their home.

Diluc's steps became heavier as he trudged along the path, his eyes drawn to the ominous, darkening sky above. Memories flooded his mind once again, vivid and intense, reminding him of a time when they had passed through this very same area under vastly different circumstances.

It was a journey back from Mondstadt, a day when the heavens had unleashed their fury upon them. Torrential rain had soaked them to the bone, leaving them shivering and vulnerable. Diluc's concern had immediately turned to Kaeya, who had proven to be particularly susceptible to illness.

Once they reached home, Diluc and Crepus had dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to nursing Kaeya back to health. They had tended to him day and night, their worry deepening with each passing hour. There were moments when Diluc's mind was consumed by dark thoughts, fearing the worst for his brother. Yet, throughout it all, their father had remained a pillar of strength, assuring Diluc that fate would not let Kaeya come to an end in such a manner.

In the depths of his concern, Diluc had struggled to understand how his father remained so calm. How could he remain unbothered while Kaeya battled such a severe cold? But Crepus had possessed an unwavering faith, a belief that transcended Diluc's understanding. He had spoken of destiny and the intertwined threads that bound their lives together, promising Diluc that Kaeya would prevail.

Those six days had been harrowing, the uncertainty and fear hovering like a dense fog. Diluc had tirelessly cared for Kaeya, tending to his needs and providing comfort whenever possible. He had witnessed his brother's weakened state, his body succumbing to the illness that had gripped him so tightly. In the darkest moments, Diluc had found solace in their father's words, clinging to the hope that Kaeya's fate was far from sealed.

And fate had indeed intervened, weaving its intricate tapestry with threads of resilience and love. Gradually, Kaeya's condition had improved, his weakened body slowly regaining strength. Diluc had watched with a mixture of

relief and awe as his brother fought back against the illness that had threatened to consume him. Day by day, Kaeya had grown stronger, his laughter returning like a beacon of hope in their lives.

Now, standing on the familiar path amidst the impending storm, Diluc felt a renewed surge of worry. The memories of their journey back from Mondstadt were a stark reminder of the fragility of life and the storms that could assail them. His gaze shifted towards the brooding sky, the weight of his concern pressing upon him.

With a determined breath, Diluc pushed forward, his steps guided by the unwavering care he felt for his brother. The memory faded as Diluc's attention was caught by the sound of subtle crying. He looked up to find Kaeya perched in a tree above him, tears streaming down his face. Concern etched on Diluc's features, he called out to him, "What are you doing up there, Kae? You might fall and get hurt!"

Kaeya's voice wavered with a mix of anger and distress, "Go away! You don't want me to be your brother. You think I'm an idiot."

Diluc sighed, trying to keep his temper in check, "Kaeya, it's going to rain. We need to go home."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you. Where's father?" Kaeya retorted.

"He's out on a delivery; you know that. Kaeya, please—" Diluc pleaded,

his voice tinged with desperation.

"Leave me alone, 'Luc!" Kaeya interrupted, his voice laced with anguish.

Annoyance welled up inside Diluc, "For goodness sake, Kae. You're my brother, whether I like it or not. And yes, you annoy me sometimes, but I'm not going to leave you to catch your death! Come home with me."

Their words continued to volley back and forth, each trying to convince the other of their point of view. Finally, with reluctance in his eyes, Kaeya climbed down from the tree.

On the way back home, Diluc scolded Kaeya for running off and explained that as brothers, they should always rely on each other when they were upset. He promised to make things better whenever Kaeya needed him.

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They arrived home just in the nick of time, the dark clouds releasing their pent-up fury as rain poured down in sheets. Thunder rumbled ominously, its echoes reverberating through the night, while lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the darkness in brief, electrifying bursts. Diluc hurriedly led Kaeya inside and guided him towards his bedroom.

With a tenderness born from a deep brotherly bond, Diluc tucked Kaeya into bed, ensuring he was warm and comfortable. The room was enveloped in a soft, comforting glow from the bedside lamp, casting gentle shadows across the walls. As they settled in, Kaeya's voice, barely above a whisper, broke the silence, "The thunder scares me, 'Luc."

Diluc's heart squeezed with empathy for his younger brother. He knew how daunting the thunderstorms could be, the booming sound shaking the very core of one's being. He let out a soft sigh, his voice carrying a soothing tone, "Come and sleep in my bed if you're that scared."

Kaeya's eyes widened, momentarily surprised by the offer but without hesitation, he nodded and moved to snuggle up beside Diluc. In the comforting warmth of his brother's embrace, Kaeya felt a sense of security and protection. Diluc wrapped his arms around Kaeya, holding him close and they lay there

together.

As the storm raged outside, Kaeya's fears were gently lulled to rest. The rain cascaded down the windows, providing a symphony of comfort, while the thunder retreated to a distant rumble, its ferocity diminishing with each passing minute. The room became their sanctuary, a haven of solace amidst the tempestuous night.

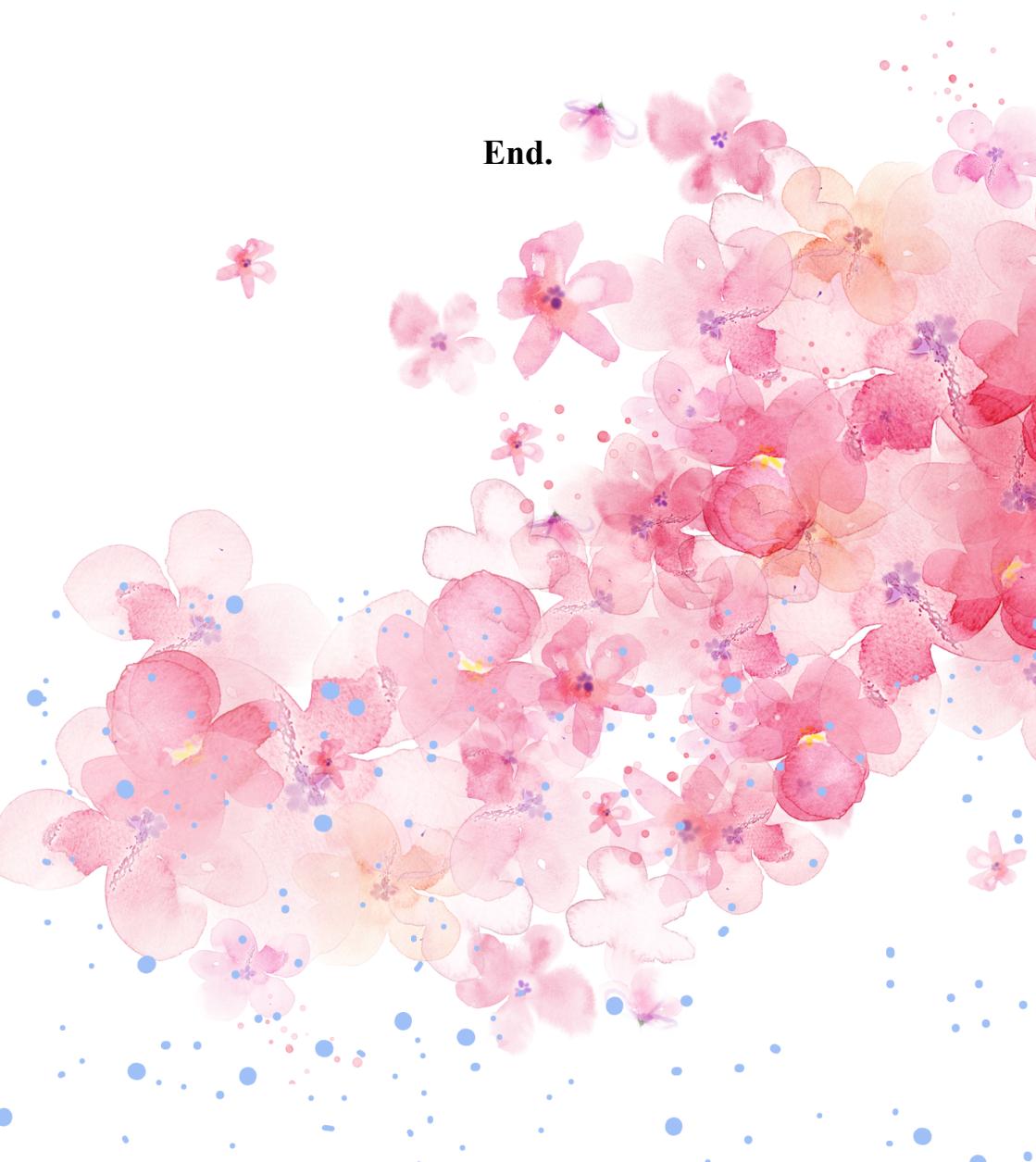
In a peaceful moment, Diluc's thoughts swirled with a profound sense of gratitude. He contemplated the blessings he had received in the form of family, the ties that bound them together extending far beyond blood. The bond they shared was forged through countless shared experiences, laughter and tears. It was a bond built on unwavering support, understanding and unconditional love.

As the rhythmic sound of raindrops on the roof and the gentle rise and fall of their breathing filled the room, Diluc's weariness overcame him. His mind surrendered to the embrace of slumber, dreams carrying him away to distant realms. In that serene state, he knew with unwavering certainty that no matter what challenges they faced or the disagreements that might arise, they were brothers, united by a love that surpassed all else.

Outside, the storm gradually began to subside, its fury fading into a gentle drizzle. The night sky cleared, unveiling a canvas of sparkling stars. Nature mirrored the tranquillity that had settled within the walls of their home. And as they slept side by side, wrapped in each other's embrace, the promise of a new

day emerged—a day filled with the warmth of familial love, the strength of their unbreakable bond and the knowledge that, together, they could weather any storm that life may bring.

End.

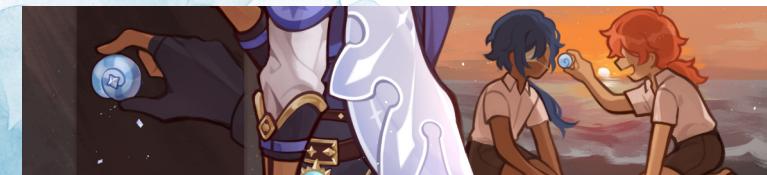




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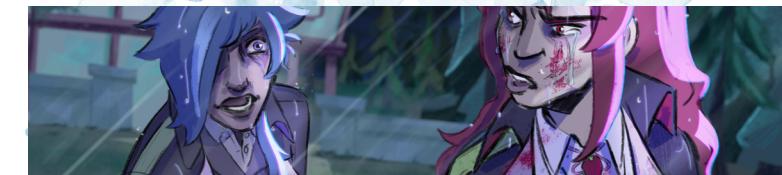
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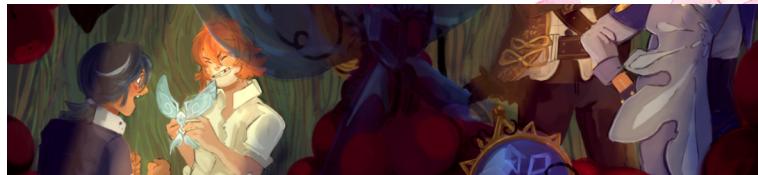
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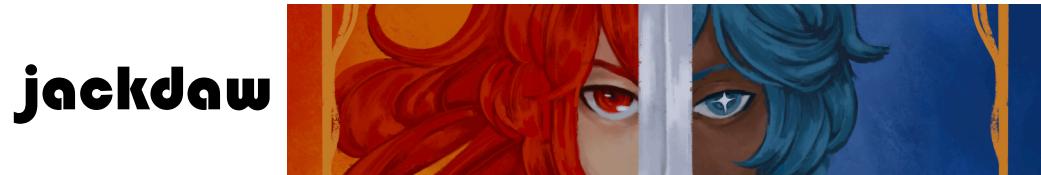
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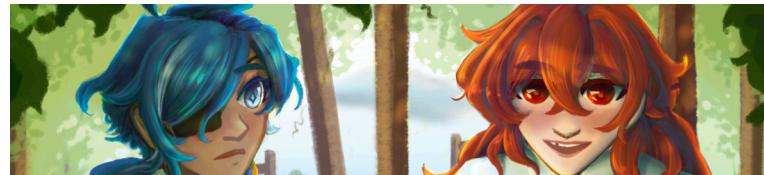
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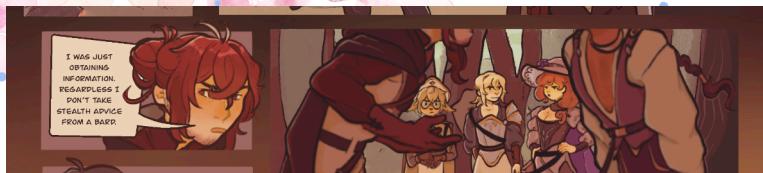


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bloomeng



Spot Arts (in order):

Pennovation, Xuanravus | lvnesart | unepical | florecuaria, ShootingStarrfish | Soy Milk | Xeli, Arbens | Lolacucaa | Circus | marshymeds | lvnesart | criickets | lvnesart | lvnesart, bread | Soap

